
Adoption England Commissioning Programme Interim Report

July 2024



Adoption
England

regional adoption agencies working together

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1. Introduction

1.1. Why is there a need for adoption support?

We know from research that the health and development of young children placed for adoption may be affected by adverse prenatal environments, genetic factors, insecure attachment, neglectful care, persistent trauma, and changes in caregiver. There is a high prevalence amongst these children, of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs as well as conditions including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attachment disorder, autism spectrum disorder, developmental trauma, foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, genetic conditions, learning difficulties and sensory issues. They also experience lower academic attainment and more behavioural problems than their peers. (National Children's Bureau and Council for Disabled Children, 2018).

The Department for Education (DfE)'s National Adoption Strategy (2021) recognised that these children and their adoptive parents will need the support of a range of mainstream through specialist services to help with the child's recovery and any longer-term needs.

Local authorities have statutory responsibility for providing adoption support services. Currently these services are provided in a variety of ways across England including by qualified Local Authority (LA) social care staff and/or by external agencies commissioned by LAs and Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). The funding and processes for accessing support are also varied. The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) is a large national resource provided by the DfE and managed by an independent agency (Mott McDonald). Applications have to be made through LAs and RAAs. In addition, both LAs and RAAs hold their own budgets which vary in amount from area to area.

1.2. Direction of travel in adoption support commissioning

Before the development of RAAs, local authorities were solely responsible for commissioning adoption support provision. Weaknesses had been identified including gaps in provision and the use of spot purchasing which didn't encourage providers or enable them to expand (DfE 2015).

The legislative framework for the regionalisation of adoption services came into existence through the Education and Adoption Act in 2016 and the number of RAAs has been steadily increasing since then. One of the drivers was to improve the range and quality of adoption support services to meet growing demand.

"To enable more economies of scale, strategic quality assurance, and larger contracts that give providers confidence to grow". (DfE 2015 p7).

Local authorities interviewed in 2019 as part of an evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) as it was then known (DfE 2020) were optimistic about the potential benefits RAAs would bring to commissioning and the wider system such as:

- More streamlined and consistently good quality processes across local authority areas.
- Greater (collective) buying and bargaining power with providers.
- Improved market shaping activity.
- Greater breadth / choice or at least visibility of provision.
- Improved overall support to placements, including preventative or holistic supports such as surgeries, training, workshops and peer groups.
- Improved relationships and work with schools.
- Increased psychological input to assessments.
- Better evidence of quality or impact of the ASF.
- Longer contracts with providers / more strategic commissioning, the development of multi-disciplinary teams.
- Better commissioning of specialist assessments, through block contracts or framework agreements rather than individual applications to the ASF.

A recent evaluation suggested that progress towards these goals has been mixed and there is still work to be done:

“Overall RAAs appeared to have increased their support offer. However, adopters interviewed held mixed views on this support, often waiting a long time to receive it. RAAs recognised the need to improve how they measured the impact of their support offers.” (DfE 2022 p17)

1.3. Current challenges in adoption support

A number of challenges have been highlighted (Mutual Ventures 2023) which can result in children and families not being able to access the right support at the right time. These include:

- **Increased demand and spend:** The ASGSF has led to increased demand for support and high levels of commissioning activity across RAAs with many purchasing the same types of interventions for their families. However, because of the way the ASGSF is set up, this is being done in a disjointed way, with limited strategic oversight and coordination.
- **Varied commissioning processes and capacity:** Commissioning of adoption support varies widely across the country meaning providers must engage in multiple processes with different requirements which RAAs have limited capacity to manage. There is also variation in how quality is assessed and managed.
- **Gaps in provision:** There are areas across the country where adoption support provision is more limited which creates a postcode lottery. This, combined with the stretched capacity of providers, means RAAs can struggle to get the right support in the right places and have a limited strategic view of future needs and resources impacting their ability to influence and shape the market.
- **Families experiencing delays:** It can be difficult for adoptive families to know how to access support because of the different ways RAA's are structured across the country. The administration required for the ASGSF, and different purchasing

frameworks, mean Adoption Support Teams have heavy caseloads creating delays for families when trying to access support.

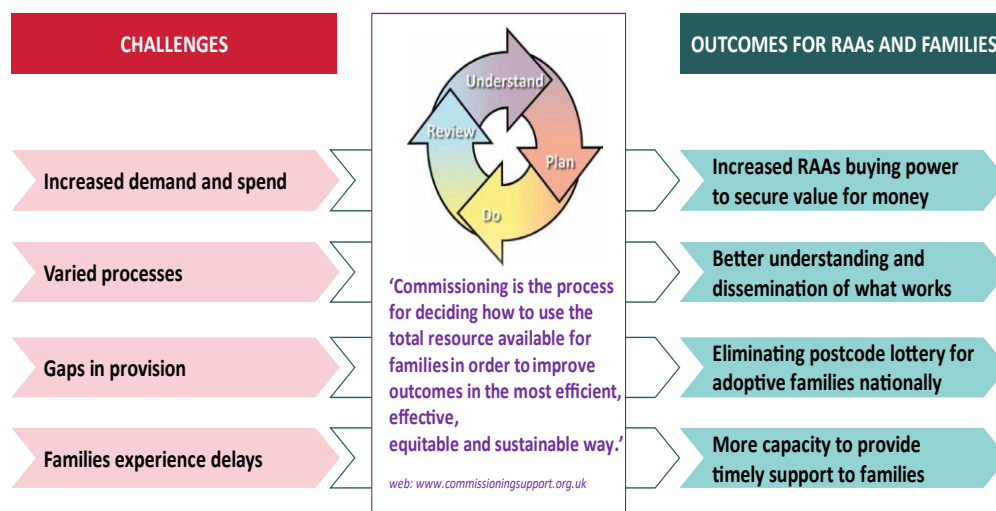
1.4. Aims of the Adoption England Commissioning Programme

In support of the National Adoption Strategy, in 2023, the DfE made grant funding available of £1.5 million in 2023-2024 and £2 million in 2024-2025 for the Adoption England Commissioning Programme (formally known as the National Adoption Commissioning Programme). The overarching aims of the Programme are to explore whether and to what extent national or pan-regional commissioning arrangements would provide better value for money and improve the speed (of access), quality and consistency of evidence-based adoption support services across the country.

The 8 pan-regions and the RAAs that sit within them are as follows:

- **Eastern:** Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Adoption; Adoption Connects; Adopt East.
- **London:** Adopt London East; Adopt London North; Adopt London South; Adopt London West.
- **Midlands:** Adopt Central England; Together4Children; Adopt@Heart; Adopt East Midlands; Adopt Birmingham.
- **North East:** Adopt North East; Adoption Tees Valley; Adopt Coast to Coast.
- **North West:** Adoption Lancashire & Blackpool; Together for Adoption; Adoption Counts; Adoption Now; Adoption in Merseyside; Cumbria Adoption.
- **South East:** Adoption Partnership South-East; Adopt South-East; Adopt South.
- **South West:** Adoption West; Adoption South West; Adopt Thames Valley.
- **Yorkshire & Humber:** One Adoption North & Humber; One Adoption South Yorkshire; One Adoption West Yorkshire.

National Adoption Commissioning Programme



1.5. IPC evaluation

The Institute of Public Care (IPC) at Oxford Brookes University has been commissioned by Adoption England to carry out an independent evaluation of the Programme. The evaluation commenced in February 2024 and will end in June 2025.

IPC's approach to the evaluation of this programme is twofold: to carry out an evaluation of the Programme as a whole and to support the evaluation of regional innovations.

Our first activity was to scope out an overarching Theory of Change for the whole programme. A draft was presented and discussed with the core team including regional members and champions at a workshop in February 2024. New suggestions and amendments were included following the workshop and a final version was agreed in March 2024, and is attached as Appendix 1. A further piece of work was then carried out to produce an Evaluation Framework – see Appendix 2, which identifies the measures of success and methodologies for collecting information and data to demonstrate to what extent the programme has been successful in achieving its aims.

Our focus then shifted to providing advice and support to the innovation sites (see section 2.4). This has centred around the development of a draft Theory of Change for each site as well as providing some commissioning expertise to ensure that innovation projects are focusing on the commissioning cycle and how adoption support is commissioned as well as the actual provision itself. Now that pan-regions have completed their needs assessments, we expect their attention to move to the implementation of their projects and we will be facilitating workshops to finalise their Theories of Change. We will then be guiding them on the choice of suitable measures and data collection tools to ensure that evidence is gathered to demonstrate in what ways the pilots have been successful and what might be improved upon and how they might be rolled out over a longer term. We will also undertake a small amount of data capture ourselves in the form of qualitative interviews towards the end of the innovation.

The final stage of the evaluation will be to analyse all the findings from the innovation sites and the other work packages to generate a final report about the Programme as a whole in June 2025.

Using documentary evidence provided by the core team and observations of meetings, the focus of this **interim report** is to consider what progress has been made so far. This includes planning and development from January 2023 to writing of the report in July 2024.

2. Commissioning Programme Activity and Outputs

2.1. Initial scoping activity and development of Implementation Strategy

The Adoption England Commissioning Programme has been developed in close collaboration with the Adoption England central team, RAAs and wider stakeholders. Early engagement included 8 pan-regional workshops to begin to map current commissioning arrangements, what the strengths and weaknesses were and explore the opportunities that the DfE funding presented. A summary of ‘what regions think’ was presented as an appendix to the Implementation Strategy (Mutual Ventures 2023). Each pan-region includes between 3 and 5 RAAs and, in most cases, it was stated that they did not work together in relation to commissioning adoption support. However, there was generally a desire to move towards joint working and all pan-regions had some good ideas about the steps they would need to take to move this forward. These summaries provide a useful baseline against which progress can be measured.

Feedback from the engagement process led to the development of 4 key programme goals / work packages focusing on:

- Providing additional commissioning capacity across the country.
- Improving collective understanding of the needs of adoptive families, now and in the future.
- Increasing pan-regional commissioning arrangements on the ground where this makes sense.
- Sharing best practice and increasing consistency.

The Implementation Strategy was a key output from the pre-programme scoping phase. It usefully summarises the rationale for the Programme, the long-term vision, the 4 goals and related work packages, the structure of the delivery team and action plan. The extent to which progress has been made so far is considered below.

2.2. Goal 1: Providing additional commissioning capacity across the country

An important first step was to establish the Adoption England Commissioning Team to drive forward the programme of work and provide direction. The team is made up of 3 core staff members from the Adoption England central team and pan-regional virtual members from each of the pan-regions involved in the Programme.

Funding was made available to pan-regions to cover the costs of regional commissioning members and regional champions, as well as to recruit or appoint external resources to support delivery. **Commissioning members** are in operational roles, have expertise in commissioning, understand the commissioning landscape and the work of the RAA's in their pan-region, and have the authority to make day-to-day decisions on behalf of their area to progress the work. It is the responsibility of

this member to take ownership of regional delivery for their area and bring regional insight and experience to the wider team.

Mobilisation of the national team began in May 2023 to recruit core staff and identify regional commissioning members. Early work included clarifying key responsibilities of core staff members and the roles of regional commissioning members and champions. A set of principles was formulated to underpin how the team would work together. These included:

- **Innovation:** understanding that work will evolve and approaches may need to alter and adapt but being open and committed to developing and trying new approaches together.
- **Co-production:** co-producing and jointly delivering outputs, regularly involving adoptive families, Voluntary Adoption Agencies and other key stakeholders.
- **Commitment:** joint responsibility for the successful delivery of the work, driving forward change together even when challenging.
- **Collaboration:** utilising collaborative working methods such as online tools, as well as seeking to codesign tools and templates for the programme together and share best practice.

A key objective for the programme is to grow understanding of what constitutes effective and evidence-based commissioning and how commissioning can be used to improve the quality and availability of adoption support. The regular monthly meetings of the whole team including representatives from all 8 pan-regions has provided an opportunity for sharing best practice and improving awareness and understanding of the value and mechanisms of commissioning. For example, at one meeting Yorkshire and Humber gave an overview of a recent audit of their Approved Provider List (APL) for Therapeutic Support Services as an example of quality assurance.

2.3. Goal 2: Improving collective understanding of the needs of adoptive families, now and in the future

In keeping with best practice, the first stage of commissioning is to analyse population need, map and review service provision, to understand gaps and inform decisions about where and how to invest resources (IPC Commissioning Cycle 2008).

It was clear from early engagement with the pan-regions that they had limited strategic understanding of the range and depth of adoptive families' support needs and how that aligns with current provision at a pan-regional level. It was decided that this piece of work should be a priority and would help pan-regions to take a more strategic approach to shaping the market and explore innovative approaches to commissioning adoption support based on evidence of need. It would also help to contribute to a national picture of need.

2.3.1. Early findings from regional needs assessments

Pan-regional representatives were invited to a meeting in early June 2024 to share what they had done so far, key findings and lessons learnt. The following themes were identified by the core team following the meeting:

Needs assessment process:

- Good working relationships have been developed between RAAs to deliver the needs assessment.
- However, there have been capacity challenges to undertake the work. Regional commissioning members are working part time in this role and have to balance the competing demands of their 'day job'. In some pan-regions they have struggled to recruit additional commissioning expertise to support delivery of the Programme within the timescales of the funding.
- Accessing and interpreting data has been challenging. LAs and RAAs across pan regions collect and store data in different ways. Many discrepancies were found and it was therefore difficult to get an accurate and comprehensive picture.
- In addition, access to the ASGSF data was complicated and required a designated data lead in each pan-region who could be given access to the portal to run off reports for all LAs and RAAs in that region. This required data sharing agreements to be established, causing delays.

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF):

- Application process - A lot of social worker time is spent on the administrative aspects of applying to the fund which is not necessarily an effective use of their time and could be better spent delivering therapeutic support themselves. This reflects earlier research findings (DfE 2020).
- Funded services - RAA leaders are keen to bring some ASGSF funded services in house. There is currently a lack of funding for early help and preventative services e.g. peer support.
- Funding model - Current model and short term nature of the fund is a barrier to developing services and strategic commissioning, which could deliver better outcomes and value for money.

Areas for service development emerging from needs analyses:

- There are adoption support gaps for birth families, adopted adults and adolescents.
- RAAs want to develop more in terms of their early help offer and more targeted support.
- Core offer on what all RAAs do in relation to adoption support provision.
- Clearer communication for families about what services are available, how they can be accessed and timescales.

Workforce:

- The adoption support workforce is a highly skilled group of staff who are not fully utilising their skills because they are engaged in making applications to the ASGSF.
- Families may not be fully aware of the skills that social workers have and the therapeutic support that they can offer.

Commissioning and procurement:

- The needs assessment helped pan-regions better understand commissioning and how it can add value. Operationally commissioning was spoken about when really it is procurement that is being undertaken.
- Can contribute to the gathering of evidence on a national scale to provide rationale for a change in funding model and influence wider system change.
- Access to & analysis of data has been a significant challenge in relation to both ASGSF and non-ASGSF. A great deal has still been learnt through this process.
- There is currently more individual purchasing of services, but not a lot of strategic commissioning within the RAAs. This is recognised as an issue that needs to be addressed.
- Localised ways of commissioning have sometimes been found to be more effective because of more buy in from local providers.
- There is little incentive for providers to join commissioning frameworks because demand is exceeding capacity in multiple areas.

Our observations from the June meeting and previous discussion at Steering Group meetings are that the work involved in gathering data and information has required a huge investment of time and energy from pan-regional team members which resulted in timescales for completion being extended. It should be acknowledged that there are several national adoption programmes currently running simultaneously and requiring input from RAAs which mean that their capacity is extremely stretched, especially in areas where they have had difficulty recruiting extra commissioning capacity to support this Programme.

Next steps will be for the core team to arrange a meeting with commissioners and people that have contributed to the regional needs assessment reports later in the summer when they are completed, to look at how to bring them together in an overview that will inform the national picture of need.

2.3.2. National picture of adoption support commissioning

In addition to supporting the regional needs assessments which included the production of a comprehensive pack of data and resources, the core team has been working on the first stage of developing a national picture of adoption support (Adoption England 2024).

The latest version of a report summarising the national picture, dated June 2024, presents an overview of the national population of adopted children between 2018/19 – 2022/23, broken down by number, age, ethnicity, presenting needs and

number receiving support. It also outlines adoption support provision and top 20 providers by total ASGSF spend during the period of the fund. It presents information on what is funded through the ASGSF and non ASGSF resource (e.g. from local authority budgets) and the types and costs of therapies being accessed.

The Appendix contains summaries of each pan-region, which, when compared with early versions included in the Implementation Strategy, demonstrate how RAAs have begun to work more collaboratively to understand current and future needs across the pan-region, what and where the gaps and challenges are and their plans for moving towards joint commissioning.

For example, in the **Eastern region** they have identified gaps in relation to data collection and differences in the support they offer to adopted adults. They have also agreed that they want to make practical, operational improvements to commissioning which will make the most difference to adopted children and families on the ground. In the **London region** they have identified areas in commissioning, procurement and approved provision processes that could be streamlined, and which will support adoption support interventions. They have agreed there is potential for pan regional commissioning for non-ASF provision and there is also potential for reviewing processes for approving, monitoring, and evaluating individual providers of ASF interventions. In the **South East Region**, the RAAs have identified that the market is underdeveloped with a number of sole traders who are inexperienced and reluctant to engage in local authority run procurement exercises; preferring to be commissioned through spot arrangements per individual child/family. They have also agreed that a shared priority is around quality assurance, building a collective understanding of what good looks like in adoption support.

The report also highlights the findings of a recent research project (Mott McDonald 2024) to explore providers' experiences of local commissioning and procurement processes, what is driving costs (for example inflation & cost of living; market rates to hire staff, and business administration costs) and how this impacts service provision, and current market demands. There are some important insights on what might need to change in the way commissioning and procurement is carried out to remove current barriers and obstacles. These include over bureaucratic procedures – providers spoke highly of the light touch arrangements during Covid that were time and cost efficient (similar responses were reported in an evaluation of the Covid scheme (DfE 2021), as well as poor communication from commissioners about future expected demand and service requirements. They also said that growing their services was still limited by the uncertainty of the future of the ASGSF.

2.4. Goal 3: Increasing pan-RAA commissioning arrangements on the ground where this makes sense

An Innovation Fund has been made available to support pan-regions to test out new ways of commissioning adoption support services and to improve commissioning arrangements at a pan-regional level. The Fund gives areas the opportunity to innovate and test different ways of working to see if they have a positive impact including improving outcomes, reducing administration and delivering more value for

money. To date, funding has been approved for 5 pan-regions, an overview of each is provided below.

Eastern Region Project: Adopter led helpline as a first response to adoption support queries/challenges.

Project details:

- Adopters put forward the idea that a helpline run by a team of peer volunteers would best serve their needs as a first point of contact for advice and guidance.
- Early intervention approach to prevent issues escalating.
- Co-designed and produced.
- Potential for an affordable, sustainable, low cost/high impact service.
- Blueprint for standard commissioning approach for the pan-region.

Project Steering Group in place. Business Plan developed including options appraisal to weigh up benefits and risks of different commissioning approaches i.e. in-house delivery or externally procured

North-East Region Project: Transforming the approach to commissioning group-based support.

Project details:

- Group-based support has developed incrementally and in isolation, led by the market rather than by need.
- Newly appointed support group coordinators will map current pan regional support offer and develop a more strategic approach to shaping the market, improving quality, ensuring value for money and innovating based on evidence of need.
- Effective and efficient pan regional commissioning of group-based adoption support will help to manage demand for more costly and limited specialist therapies and prevent complexity and severity emerging for adopted children and families and improve outcomes.
- Integrated within wider pan-regional improvement journey.

South East Region: 'Checking In and Staying Connected Service' for adoptive parents.

Project details:

- Evidence from Adoption UK (2024) and locally collected feedback from adopters suggests that they can feel unsupported and are only able to access adoption support at times of crisis.

- Project aim is to put in place a consistent method, across the pan-region, of keeping in touch after the Adoption Order.
- RAAs will be able to provide timely support to adoptive families and identify any issues before they escalate into complex problems by directing them to preventative support as soon as possible.
- Co-productive approach with adoptive parents, adoption support workers and commissioners to design and agree the how contact is made, what level of contact is required and when the checking in takes place.
- Data that is collected as part of this service will enable a pan-regional approach to be taken to identifying needs to inform future service developments, training needs and commissioning requirements.

Yorkshire and Humber Region: Market engagement event to improve understanding of and address gaps in therapeutic provision for adopted children in the region.

Project 1 details:

- Workshop for RAA staff outlining current provision available through the APL with a view to developing staff confidence in identifying the right therapy and the right time for children, young people and families.
- Workshop with providers will share information about the adoption support processes across the pan-region and highlight areas where current demand exceeds capacity for services in terms of location and therapy type.
- Event will allow new therapists to apply to join the APL with a view to increase therapeutic capacity in the pan-region, potentially covering areas where there isn't already provision.

Second project: In house delivery of Building Underdeveloped Sensorimotor Systems (BUSS) therapy to families across Yorkshire and Humber.

Project 2 details:

- Families are currently waiting a long time to access BUSS therapy
- A member of staff will be employed in one of the RAAs (One Adoption West Yorkshire) to deliver BUSS therapy 1 to 1 and in groups.
- Block book rather than making individual applications to the ASGSF for this provision.
- Reduce waiting time for families requiring BUSS therapy.
- Increased number of families able to access the BUSS therapy.
- Test whether drawing down block funding from the ASGSF rather than make individual applications is more cost effective and efficient (due to reducing social work and administration time) and expedites access to support (due to not having to wait for funding to be approved).

Midlands: The creation of a regional short breaks (respite) scheme that is informed by therapeutic parenting principles and led by peers.

Project details:

- Research will be carried out to identify national models of delivering short breaks (respite) schemes within other delivery areas such as fostering and SEND.
- Existing provision across the West and East Midlands will be reviewed and evaluated to find out what works well.
- Data from the pan-regional needs assessment will be analysed to establish the extent of need for this type of support and who the priority children/families might be.
- The scheme will be co-designed with adoptive parents from across the East and West Midlands pan-region.
- The project will include exploring and developing the market for such provision, and will ask for flexibilities from the ASGSF to develop different respite options on a pan-regional level.

2.5. Goal 4: Sharing best practice and increasing consistency: Commissioning Support Offer

Alongside the regular opportunities for sharing best practice at core team meetings, the focus of this work package will be to develop a Community of Practice which will aim to address the current challenges in the adoption support landscape by:

- Facilitating information sharing across regions.
- Providing standards for quality assurance and due diligence.
- Offering guidance and training for providers and practitioners on commissioning processes, minimum standards, expectations, and lines of accountability.
- Offering guidance regarding how RAAs commission in line with public procurement regulations.
- Providing a shared suite of resources and evidence base for commissioned adoption support, for example tools and templates used for monitoring and review.
- Hosting discussion forums for commissioning related queries.
- Offering support for providers on developing their adoption support offer.

The priority for 2024/25 is to determine format and content, establish consultation & engagement process and roll out on Adoption England website.

3. Summary of findings so far and what needs to happen next

3.1. Key achievements

The Programme has established clear goals with linked work packages. The **Adoption England Commissioning Team** is in place made up of core staff members, regional commissioning members and regional champions. The vast majority of RAAs have joined the programme, forming into 8 regions. There is a high level of attendance at NACT meetings, which have taken place since July 2023.

Intelligence gathering, (the analyse stage of the commissioning cycle) in the form of **regional needs assessments** are progressing well, to better understand population needs, current provision and commissioning practice at a regional level. This has been time consuming but is a vital first step in understanding what needs to change to improve the speed, quality and consistency of adoption support services. It has provided the rationale and evidence base for innovation projects which will test out new pan-regional commissioning approaches to deliver improved services and support for adoptive families.

A National Picture of Adoption Support Commissioning has been compiled as a first stage in presenting a comprehensive overview of adoption support needs and provision across England.

These two pieces of work represent a big step forward in understanding the needs of adoptive families both now and in the future as well as the strengths and weaknesses in how services and support are being commissioned and how this can be improved. The self-reflection and 'lessons learnt' aspect has helped to gel relationships between RAAs and develop a greater sense of cohesion within pan-regions.

Informed by their needs assessments, RAAs have come together to devise **innovation projects** to test out new ways of commissioning adoption support services and to improve commissioning arrangements at a pan-regional level. A common feature is that adoptive families are involved in the design of these projects, and there is an emphasis on early help to prevent problems from escalating.

3.2. Challenges

There is a **high degree of complexity in the adoption support commissioning landscape**. In some areas LAs are still commissioning adoption support, alongside RAAs and each are using different approaches. There is variation in the way RAAs are structured and governed, with some being established longer than others. The geographical scope and number of LAs operating in RAAs is also a factor. Whilst some RAAs have clear commissioning processes with standardised approaches and documentation, others manage their commissioning through spot purchasing approaches. There are currently very few pan-regional commissioning arrangements in place. **The scale of change needed to bring about more consistent, effective**

and evidence based strategic commissioning is huge and will take considerable effort and time.

Time and capacity to deliver the work packages in the Programme is a key challenge for RAAs who are being pulled in other directions by competing demands from other national adoption projects / workstreams happening at the same time, such as the Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to Adoption Support.

Strategic commissioning capacity and expertise is not readily available within adoption. Operational commissioning activity is a core part of the requirements of the ASGSF and therefore has become a core part of a Social Worker's role, but it is questionable whether they have the right skills and knowledge to carry out this function well. Whilst it is positive that funding has been made available to regions to improve capacity to deliver this Programme, there have been difficulties in recruiting staff and **concerns about how to sustain the expertise** beyond the life of the Programme.

There may be reluctance to engage in the Programme by some people working in RAAs who **do not yet see the relevance or benefits of investing time and resources into commissioning** (not least because the lion's share of the adoption support resource is still held and determined nationally through the ASGSF rather than devolved for use regionally).

LA financial pressures are driving efficiencies in RAAs. This may mean that commissioning resources and activities may be viewed as a luxury rather than a necessary part of the service.

There are also questions as to whether LA, RAA and health funding can be pooled to commission more effectively, in an environment of **pressures on health services** (e.g. child mental health services) and local authorities.

Good commissioning is based on being able to gather intelligence about needs and current service provision (what is being provided, to whom, at what cost etc). **Lack of data is currently a huge barrier.** In part this may be because there is no requirement for agencies to report on adoption support data to central government which has resulted in inconsistent collection of data on services and support not funded through the ASGSF. In addition, data that is collected by Mott McDonald on services and support that is funded through the ASGSF is not easily available to the regions. Some progress was made earlier this year through a new support offer from Mott McDonald but pan-regions reported that the time and effort that was involved in interrogating these datasets was beyond their capacity.

3.3. Next steps

Despite the challenges, pan-regional working is viewed as the direction of travel by most RAAs. The regional needs assessment exercise appears to have generated energy and enthusiasm that improvements can be made by working together. The key areas of focus for the Programme in Year 2 (April 2024 – March 2025) are:

- To complete pan regional needs assessments and the national picture of need.

- Progress the implementation of the innovation projects.
- Request an extension to the Programme to enable sufficient time for the projects to be embedded so that they can be properly evaluated.
- Implement the commissioning support offer, by establishing a virtual Community of Practice.
- National dialogue with the DfE to review the ASGSF.

In terms of the evaluation, our next steps will be to provide advice to innovation sites on measures and collection of data.

In the final stage of our evaluation, we will be looking for evidence that will enable us to answer the key evaluation questions for the Programme which include:

- To what extent has the Programme provided additional commissioning capacity across the country?
- How has the additional capacity improved commissioning of adoption support nationally and regionally?
- To what extent is there growing understanding of what constitutes effective and evidence-based commissioning and how commissioning can be used?
- To what extent is there better knowledge about existing commissioning arrangements for adoption support regionally and nationally?
- To what extent has the Programme improved national and regional understanding of the needs of adoptive families, both now and in the future.
- To what extent has there been an increase in pan-regional commissioning arrangements on the ground, that test out new ways of commissioning adoption support?
- What evidence is there of improved collaboration between different RAAs in regions and between different commissioners e.g. in Health and Education?
- To what extent has the Programme enabled the sharing of best practice and increased consistency?
- To what extent is there improved awareness and understanding of the mechanisms of commissioning & how that might apply to adoption support & help with the availability, relevance and quality of adoption support?

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Appendix 1 – Adoption England Commissioning Programme Theory of Change

Rationale for the Commissioning Programme	Key mechanisms	Desired short term effects	Desired medium to longer term outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adopted children are likely to have experienced neglect or abuse which often cause enduring problems e.g. with child development, attachment, or (challenging) behaviour (Beyond the Adoption Order, 2014) ■ The National Adoption Strategy ‘Achieving Excellence Everywhere’ (2021) recognised how these children and their adoptive parents will need the support of a range of mainstream through specialist services to help with the child’s recovery and any longer term needs. ■ The National Strategy also proposed investigating whether support being commissioned nationally or pan-regionally would secure better value for money and greater consistency in the speed of provision and availability of different types of support. Currently, it is commissioned by LAs, RAAs and regionally including with reference to ‘universal’, ‘targeted’ and ‘specialist’ levels of support. All are potential in scope for this programme. ■ In support of the National Strategy, DfE has made available grant funding to explore whether and to what extent this type of commissioning is feasible, and whether it provides better value for money etc. ■ Within this overall policy context, there are increases in demand for ASF funded (therapeutic) support, mostly as a result of repeat rather than completely new applications. ■ Existing evidence suggests that there may be significant variation in regional commissioning arrangements, skills and activities - with a general over-reliance on spot purchasing and insufficient experience in or levers for managing the market (*this may be linked with ASF systems) ■ Existing evidence suggests that there may be a degree of postcode lottery for some forms of adoption support ■ RAA leaders and key staff may hold a belief that active including strategic commissioning is not possible until ASF funding becomes devolved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Funding across a 2 year period 2023 – 2025 (£1.5 million in year one and £2 million in year two) ■ Early exploratory work undertaken in Y1 by Adoption England to develop an Implementation Plan (June 2023) <p>It is proposed that the programme’s aims will be achieved through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Providing additional and improving overall <i>commissioning capacity</i> and improving strategic commissioning & purchasing arrangements across England (at a pan-regional level). ■ As an initial key element of the strategic commissioning cycle, improving national and regional <i>understanding of the needs of adoptive families</i>, both now and in the future – to inform commissioning decisions. ■ Growing understanding of <i>what constitutes effective and evidence-based commissioning</i> and how commissioning can be used (share best practice and ensure consistency). ■ <i>Testing new approaches to commissioning adoption support.</i> <p>Supported by a national programme team based in Leeds, regional commissioning leads, regional champions, and broader work undertaken by Adoption England to scope a core adoption support offer (including levels of need), key activities undertaken to date or currently being undertaken include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Mapping existing commissioning arrangements</i> across England e.g. to identify different types of commissioning frameworks and how they function, commissioning resources available to RAAs etc¹. It is intended that this map may be used interactively and sustainably rather than as a one-off resource. ■ <i>Developing a national picture of adoption support needs</i> including with reference to ASF data and Coram I data (needs compared with existing ‘demand’ and service provision). ■ <i>Support for the supra-regions (8 in total) to self-evaluate how they are currently commissioning</i> and the extent to which this is evidence based – what are the strengths, what are the gaps? <p>In the next year of the programme, planned activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Innovating and testing new ways of commissioning adoption support</i> e.g. at a national and pan-regional level – using innovation funding up to a maximum of £109K per region / national level. Applications are currently being sought and include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In one region, to improve their commissioning of group-based adoption support, including with use of ASF funding. - To commission early intervention including an adopter-led helpline that can be provided pan-regionally. ■ <i>Providing regions with a commissioning support (learning) offer</i> including training and toolkit support to embed good commissioning and purchasing habits and practices linked with the strategic commissioning cycle (analyse, plan, do, review). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Quick wins e.g. standardised procurement tools or QA arrangements, benchmarking of costs for therapies within regions, ■ Innovation sites up and running ■ Improved collaboration between different RAAs in regions – people working together to solve issues ■ Improved awareness and understanding of the value and mechanisms of commissioning & how that might apply to adoption support & help with the availability, relevance and quality of adoption support ■ Improved understanding of what is currently being commissioned (from whom, for whom, and its value) ■ Improved understanding of the likely needs of adopted children and families and the types of services and supports that may be required to meet those needs (and in what quantity) ■ Improved understanding of the value of applying the evidence base in the strategic commissioning and procurement of services ■ Barriers to strategic commissioning begin to be addressed (where possible) e.g. ■ Engagement with providers about what services are needed within a region and why, how they can be provided 	<p>As a direct result of programme activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sustainable ownership of commissioning (and its value) in regions – including resources that can be dedicated to commissioning adoption support over time ■ Improvements in commissioning capacity & practice (application of knowledge) ■ Innovation sites provide examples of what can be done, how and to what effect(s) ■ Levers in place for managing the market <p>In the longer term, across England:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improvements in commissioning capacity and practice relating to adoption support ■ Improvements in the timeliness (speed) of access to adoption support ■ Improvements in the availability of a range of adoption support ■ Improvements in the quality and consistency of evidence-based support services ■ Beginning to influence health and education commissioning

¹ Access to data at a national level has been challenging

Counter factual (factors):

- This is a major change programme – change takes time and generally requires good ‘push and pull’ factors to be successful.
- Barriers to implementing this next phase of the programme are thought to include that people working in RAAs do not yet see the relevance or benefits of investing time and resources into commissioning (not least because the lion’s share of the adoption support resource is still held and determined nationally through the ASF rather than devolved for use regionally). How can commissioning expertise and resources be developed sustainably (many existing resources are being funded through the Programme)?
- Local authority financial pressures driving efficiencies in RAAs – means commissioning resources and activities may be viewed as a luxury rather than a necessary part of the service.
- There are also questions as to whether local authority, RAA and health funding can be pooled to commission more effectively, in an environment of pressures on health services (e.g. child mental health services) and local authorities.

Appendix 2 – Evaluation Framework

Evaluation Questions	Measures or data required to answer the questions	Who will collect the information and how	When will the information be collected/collated
<p>To what extent has the Programme provided additional commissioning capacity across the country?</p> <p>How has the additional capacity improved commissioning of adoption support nationally and regionally?</p> <p>To what extent is there growing understanding of what constitutes effective and evidence based commissioning and how commissioning can be used?</p>	Information about how the national team, regional commissioning members and regional champions have supported the delivery of the programme goals and how funding made available to regions has been used (outputs and outcomes).	<p>National Team to provide documentary evidence of activities and outputs to be reviewed by IPC.</p> <p>IPC to use methods that might include survey, focus groups, and/or 1 to 1 interviews with national team, regional commissioning members and regional champions, as well as innovation sites².</p>	<p>April/May 2024 to be included in interim report in around June 2024.</p> <p>March/April 2025 for final report in around May/June 2025.</p>
To what extent is there better knowledge about existing commissioning	Initial work carried out by MV.	National Team to provide documentary evidence of	April/May 2024 to be included in interim report in around June 2024.

² The number and type of methods to be determined in relation to overall evaluation resource available, (i.e. depending on number of innovation sites when this is known).

Evaluation Questions	Measures or data required to answer the questions	Who will collect the information and how	When will the information be collected/collated
<p>arrangements for adoption support regionally and nationally?</p> <p>Including what is currently being commissioned (extent to which evidence based), how, from whom, for whom and its value.</p> <p>How well are arrangements working currently?</p> <p>What are regions doing to address gaps, challenges?</p>	<p>National Picture of Adoption Support Commissioning.</p> <p>Notes of national team monthly meetings with regions, Steering Group 'share and learn' presentations, Teams channel discussions.</p>	<p>activities and outputs to be reviewed by IPC.</p> <p>As above, methods tbc but may include survey, focus group, 1 to 1 interviews with national team, regional commissioning members and regional champions, as well as innovation sites.</p>	<p>March/April 2025 for final report in around May/June 2025.</p>
<p>To what extent has the programme improved national and regional understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the needs of adoptive families, both now and in the future. • the types of services and supports that may be required to meet those 	<p>National Picture of Adoption Support Commissioning.</p> <p>Regional Needs Assessments.</p> <p>Feedback from the regions about the process – what worked well, what was challenging, barriers and</p>	<p>Documentary review by IPC.</p> <p>National team convening meeting in June 2024 to gather feedback.</p> <p>As above, methods tbc but may include survey, focus group, 1 to 1 interviews with national team, regional</p>	<p>Deadline for completion by regions extended to end of June 2024.</p> <p>March/April 2025 for final report in around May/June 2025.</p>

Evaluation Questions	Measures or data required to answer the questions	Who will collect the information and how	When will the information be collected/collated
needs and in what quantity.	<p>enablers e.g. around data sources and lessons learnt.</p> <p>How have their insights informed commissioning activities and decisions?</p> <p>What engagement/development work have they done with providers and what has been the result?</p>	commissioning members and regional champions, as well as innovation sites.	
<p>To what extent has there been an increase in pan RAA commissioning arrangements on the ground, that test out new ways of commissioning adoption support?</p> <p>In what ways do they demonstrate improved</p>	<p>Number of innovation sites that are up and running.</p> <p>Information about and examples of how the sites have implemented commissioning best practice to achieve their goals.</p>	<p>IPC will support up to 6 sites to collect evaluation data, e.g. by facilitating Theory of Change workshops and suggesting measures and methods of data capture³.</p> <p>IPC will carry out a small number of interviews with site related stakeholders.</p>	<p>Ongoing from April 2024.</p> <p>IPC to draw together data from each site and additional interview data to generate a mini report outlining key themes and learning from the innovations.</p>

³ Innovation sites will have their own Theory of Change and tailored data capture proposals.

Evaluation Questions	Measures or data required to answer the questions	Who will collect the information and how	When will the information be collected/collated
<p>commissioning and purchasing practice? (e.g. greater level of market engagement, improved quality assurance process, co-design of services etc).</p> <p>what evidence is there of improved collaboration between different RAAs in regions and between different commissioners e.g. health and education?</p> <p>In what ways have they improved access, availability, quality and consistency of evidence based support services?</p>	<p>Data from sites to demonstrate progress and early signs of impact.</p>		<p>March/April 2025 for final report in around May/June 2025.</p>
<p>To what extent has the Programme enabled the sharing of best practice</p>	<p>Information about the national commissioning support offer⁴ – what has</p>	<p>To be monitored by Programme Team nationally.</p>	<p>Information to be collated by national team in March / April 2025 and shared with IPC to</p>

⁴ This is still in development and likely to include guidance and training for providers and practitioners on commissioning processes, minimum standards, expectations, and lines of accountability; a shared suite of resources and evidence base of commissioned adoption support; discussion forums for commissioning related queries; practice workshops, lunch and learn sessions and webinars.

Evaluation Questions	Measures or data required to answer the questions	Who will collect the information and how	When will the information be collected/collated
<p>and increased consistency?</p> <p>To what extent is there improved awareness and understanding of the mechanisms of commissioning & how that might apply to adoption support & help with the availability, relevance and quality of adoption support?</p>	<p>been provided / what has been the take up e.g. of website resources, and attendance at training events, webinars, discussion forums, practice workshops and impact on knowledge, skills and confidence.</p>	<p>IPC to advise on measures and monitoring arrangements to explore improvement in commissioning knowledge, skills and confidence of staff involved in commissioning adoption support.</p> <p>IPC to carry out survey / focus groups /1 to 1 interviews tbc with national team, regional commissioning members, regional champions and innovation sites.</p>	<p>be included in final report May/June 2025.</p>

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