

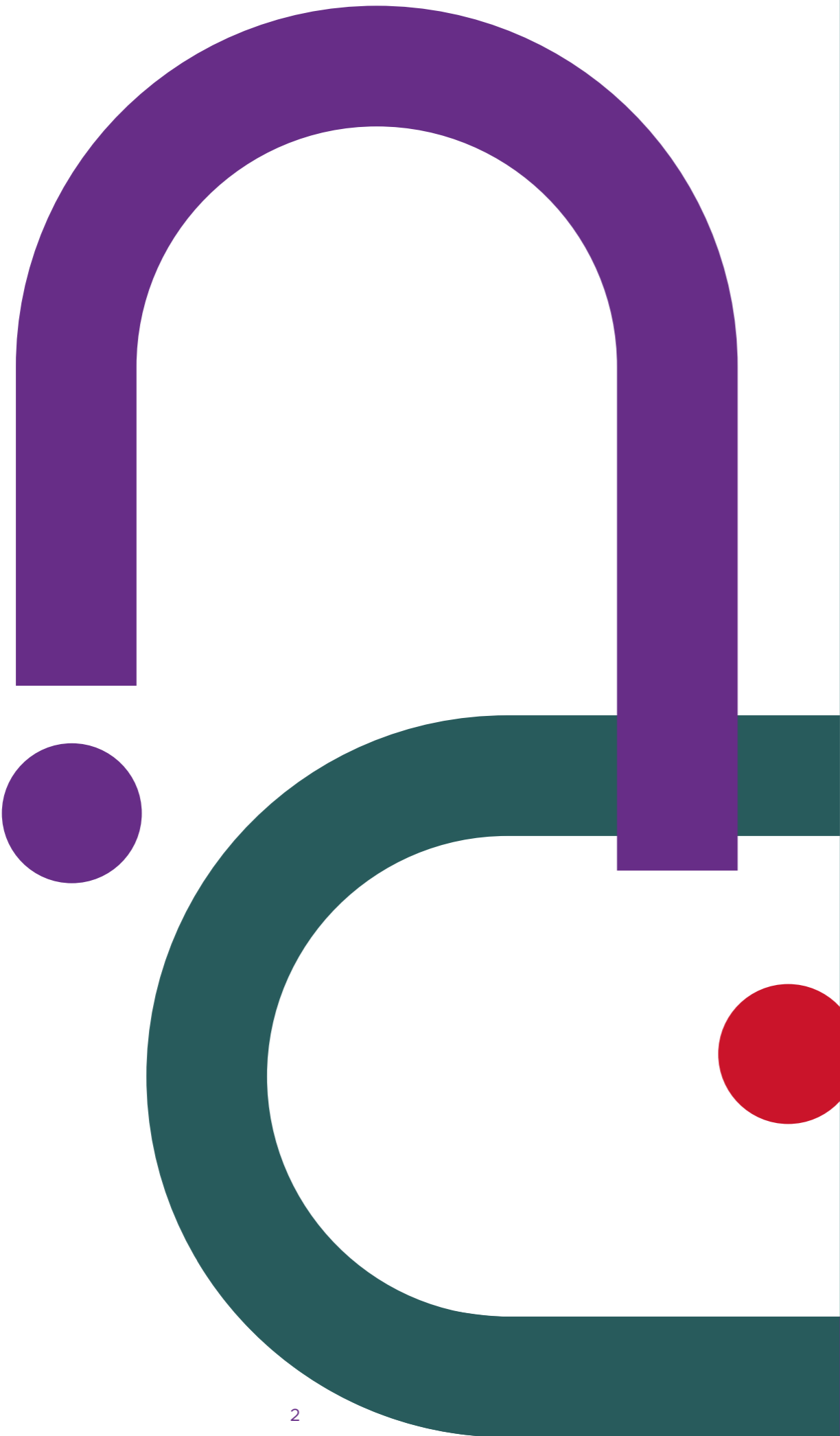


Adoption
England

regional adoption agencies working together

Annual Report
2023/24





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Foreword

The past year has been challenging for children, families and adoption agencies. The tightening of public sector finances has put immense pressure on individuals, local authorities, health services and third-sector organisations. The Ofsted thematic inspection of regional adoption agencies report in December 2023 highlighted extensive delays for many families accessing adoption support. This is due to a combination of increased demand for services, exacerbated by the recent pandemic and resource issues within agencies.

The insufficiency of adopters available to meet the number and needs of children for whom we are family finding remains a challenge. A combination of economic, social, procedural and personal factors contribute to this issue. Alongside this, we must recognise that our social contract with adopters is changing. We expect adopters to continue accessing support and help to meet the multiple, diverse, and lifelong needs of their children. Additionally, supporting children to maintain meaningful connections with their birth family is crucial in modern adoption. Addressing these issues effectively raises questions about the legal and policy context, resourcing and practice.

Despite these challenges, Adoption England is determined to address the issues through collaboration and partnership working. In this third annual report, we outline our programme of work and highlight the key achievements during the year.

The activities within this report show the commitment of staff, adopters, adopted people and birth parents who continue to work together to develop firm foundations, innovate, test different approaches to practice, and develop better support for adopted people, adopters and birth families.

Over the last year, we have focused on strengthening practice. A series of national practice standards, based on research and evidence, has been developed and implemented. The early permanence and matching standards are now available. The new standards around the adopter journey and supporting important relationships for children will be shared with the sector in the coming months, and the implementation will be supported by a comprehensive learning programme.

The shared learning within the communities of practice and the regional projects across early permanence, matching, multidisciplinary approaches and commissioning, are providing positive examples of the impact these approaches can have on improving outcomes for children and their families.

In March 2024, we launched the Adoption England strategy, bringing together the views of professionals across the sector and experts by experience. Together, we are building a vision of how to modernise adoption to better meet the needs of children and families. Adoption England is committed to reporting on the progress towards these outcomes moving forward.



Sarah Johal MBE

National Adoption Strategic Lead
Adoption England

Adoption England Programme Overview

Key Achievements



The Stories We Bring with Us

A new film commissioned by Adoption England and produced by PAC-UK shares the stories of adopted people. This film can be used by agencies during the training of new prospective adopters. The film resources can be found on our website:

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/resources-adoptive-parents-help-maintaining-relationships-adopted-children>



The Missing Piece

An Adoption England commissioned film shares the voices of birth parents, helping potential adopters understand the difficult position birth parents are often in. The film resources can be found on our website:

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/resources-adoptive-parents-help-maintaining-relationships-adopted-children>



Activity Days

Adoption England funded 8 National Activity Days (delivered by Coram-i) and 7 pan-regional Activity Days (delivered by 4 RAAs) to increase matching opportunities for children. These events generated 93 expressions of interest.



Culture Change in Maintaining Relationships

The programme, led by the University of East Anglia, started in May 2023 and will run until April 2025. To date, 14 free open access webinars have been held, with a total of 5197 people signing up. These webinars involve experts by experience and explore key areas of how culture change can be achieved for children when staying in touch with birth relatives or those important to them. There are now over 160 Culture Change champions across Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs), Local Authorities (LAs), as well as some cross-region independents and judiciary.



Early Permanence

- The proportion of Early Permanence adoptions has increased since 2020/21. In 2022/23, 20% of all adoptions were Early Permanence adoptions, and analysis of the Q2 2023/24 data indicates that this has increased to 23%.



Training

- 14 sessions of Agency Decision Makers training were delivered in partnership with CoramBAAF, reaching 161 people across the country. Further support is provided through bi-monthly drop-in sessions.
- 3 sessions of Judiciary training through Judicial College were delivered in partnership with CoramBAAF, to improve consistency and understanding around Early Permanence.
- Staff College delivered the Black and Asian Leadership Initiative (BALI) programme for global majority staff within the adoption sector and in partnership with 4 RAAs, delivered the 'Just Heart, Just Home' programme to raise cultural awareness and support for global majority children.



FamilyConnect

Adoption England is piloting the first nationally commissioned service with Family Action and PAC-UK to provide a specialist telephone advice line through their website. This service supports adult adoptees, their descendants and birth relatives who wish to reconnect with their relatives.



Adoption England Website

The new website provides a much-needed platform to share information about adoption resources, training materials and news from the sector, with a library for professionals to share and develop practice. On average, 3,400 people visit the site every month of which 3,300 on average are new users.



Openness in Adoption – Time to Change the Approach

Over 500 people attended the first hybrid conference to kick-start the Culture Change project and raise awareness of the importance of maintaining relationships for children that are adopted.



Outcome 1:

Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared and supported to meet children’s needs.

There are now more children in England with a plan for adoption needing a permanent home, than there are people coming forward to adopt. Economic uncertainty and the rise in cost of living is delaying people’s decisions to grow their family, and for people considering adoption this is the same, with concerns about their ability to cope and whether the timing is right for them. This may also impact upon children being able to move in with their adoptive family in a timely way.

The length of time taken to find a suitable match and permanent home has affected children with a plan for adoption in sibling groups, those with additional or complex needs, children aged five years and over, and children from Black and mixed heritage backgrounds, the most. During 2023, recruitment focused on finding adopters to meet the needs of these ‘priority’ groups. We delivered two key campaigns – the first in June, focusing on reassuring prospective adopters of the vast support available along the journey and featuring a range of adoptive families to reflect different backgrounds and challenges, including: an LGBTQ+ couple; single adopters; Black and transracial adopters; and an adopter with physical disabilities.

The second campaign ran during National Adoption Week in October, with a focus on continuing to reshape attitudes of adoption and positively promote modern adoption. Again, we featured real life stories to elevate the voices of people who have been adopted and build a broader understanding of the benefits of adoption.

Our campaigns achieved an increase in media coverage compared to 2022, with a total of over 1,000 broadcast, print and online pieces, and over 2,000 link conversions to agency sites through paid social media. We nearly doubled our target for driving traffic to the You Can Adopt website, with over 8,019 visitors, as well as exceeding

conversions with over 1,800 referrals to agency sites. We’ve also significantly increased You Can Adopt social media followers and engagement through ‘always on’ paid and organic social media, with now over 5,900 Instagram and over 4,000 Facebook followers.

To address the wider issue of sufficiency now affecting all children in need of a permanent home, our campaign activity for 2024 has a much stronger recruitment focus and longevity, to retain interest generated from an initial campaign spike and increase conversions between the Spring launch and National Adoption Week in October.

Our objective for 2024 is to encourage those considering adoption to take that first step on their adoption journey now. We will achieve this by addressing barriers and drivers for people considering adoption, reassuring them that there is lots of support along the way, and promoting the benefits of modern adoption to help keep people engaged and manage expectations throughout the process.



Adopter Journey

Adoption England’s The Adopter Journey project is committed to enhancing the adopter experience and preparing them to meet the needs of children in need of adoption.

Adoption Eligibility Criteria

The first contact for some prospective adopters can be full of anxiety, making it crucial that this initial interaction is positive and engaging. The eligibility criteria, published in Autumn 2023, have now been agreed and implemented by all RAAs to ensure consistent messaging for prospective adopters across the country.

Building on the previous mystery shopping exercise conducted by Adoption England, we will recommission this initiative to conduct a full evaluation of customer service, knowledge and efficiency at the initial contact stage. The feedback gathered will help agencies improve the quality and effectiveness of their services, ensuring a better experience for prospective adopters.

National Adopter Journey Practice Standards

The Adopter Journey Working Group has worked across the sector with voluntary adoption agencies and CoramBAAF to develop national practice standards for the recruitment, assessment and matching of adopters. Following a comprehensive consultation period with partners, experts by experience, and stakeholders they are due to be published in Autumn 2024. This will be accompanied by a comprehensive learning programme to support practitioners.

Adopter Preparation Working Group

The Adopter Preparation Working Group has been focused on strengthening the preparation of adopters, ensuring that equality, diversity and inclusion are considered for all prospective adopters. The content is being reviewed to address the changing needs of adopted children today, including their early experiences of trauma, grief and loss, and the importance of identify for children.

The group has gathered insights from people with lived experience and research to better understand the identity needs of children as they grow and develop, and the important role that birth families play in their children’s lives. Preparation and training for adopters is a continuous process beyond approval, and tailoring this to the individual needs of adopters and their children is crucial. This work will be ongoing during the next year.

Increasing the Diversity of Adoption Panels

Adoption England commissioned Ade Larigo (Agency Connections) in 2022 to work with RAAs to increase the diversity within adoption panel membership. A report was published in Autumn 2023 and shared with agencies, with 28 new panel members recruited across the agencies. Some key recommendations include:

- RAAs should undertake annual audits to monitor the diversity of panel membership and seek feedback from panel members and applicants.
- RAAs should develop an equality, diversity and inclusion strategy, and proactively recruit members from diverse communities.
- RAAs should provide a safe and supportive space for panel members, facilitated by experts by experience, and offer peer support and training.

RAAs continue to work on these issues, and many agencies have increased the diversity of their panels as a result. Over the next year, the National Adoption Recruitment Programme Board will focus on the recommendations from this report, working with RAAs and VAAs to review progress on them and agree any further activity to support his work.



Outcome 2:

Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.

Letter Swap

Traditional letterbox contact of once or twice a year has been problematic for various reasons: exchanges often never start, lapse, are not reviewed or changed, and ultimately do not meet adopted people's need to make sense of their identity.

The Letter Swap pilot project began in June 2022 to test and develop a digital platform, evaluating whether this could improve the current system. It also considered implementation issues for agencies transitioning to a digital system and sought to assess users' experiences with the digital approach. The evaluation was completed by the University of East Anglia (UEA), with PAC-UK providing support for birth relatives as required by the RAAs in March 2024.

Six RAAs tested the system with birth and adoptive families. In the project, 135 letterboxes were created by RAAs on the Letter Swap system. Each letterbox related to a child or sibling group and covered contact between the adoptive parents and birth relatives.

Initial findings suggest that a digital system can be a useful tool in the broader effort to modernise contact in adoption.

Key Learnings

- Promising indications from this pilot show that the goal of improving post-adoption contact can be furthered by platforms like Letter Swap, provided there is significant buy-in to a different approach from all involved.
- Strong leadership and cultural change are required to maximise the benefits of a digital system.
- A digital system can offer advantages in administering contact, including the ability to keep a repository of contact, efficiency, speed of exchange, a tracking and acknowledgment function, added security, and flexibility with contact type.

Key Challenges

- Some birth relatives found accessing the platform difficult, needed support to be encouraged to use a new system, and lost trust if there were technical difficulties.
- Although PAC-UK was a partner in the project, many birth relatives preferred support from the RAA, with whom they had an existing relationship, and did not take up the offer of support from PAC-UK.
- When adoptive families agreed to use the system, it did not necessarily change the frequency or way they exchanged information, merely replicating their existing communication on the digital platform. Very few reviews of agreements were completed by the RAAs before families used the system.
- Resources within RAAs to implement a new system were limited.

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

- Birth relative and participant

"For me, it just removes barriers and makes it a bit more informal. My daughter now just wants to write when she wants to write. When she does a picture, she says, 'Can we send it to [birth mum]?'. Then birth mum sent something back, and I just handed my phone to my daughter and said, 'This has been sent.' It just seems more personal."

- Adoptive parent and participant

The full report and briefing are available on Adoption England's website and can be found here: <https://adoptionengland.co.uk/news/evaluation-letter-swap-project>.

There are a small number of providers developing digital systems, ARCBOX, Charms, and Letter Swap is now open for any RAA or local authority to use.

Additional resources are available on Adoption England's website here: <https://adoptionengland.co.uk/maintaining-relationships-adoption-resources>.

Culture Change Project

Adoption England commissioned the University of East Anglia (UEA) to collaborate on the Culture Change Project. This initiative drew on research findings and UEA's theory of change to improve the maintenance of relationships for adopted children.

This group of dedicated practitioners are champions in their areas, sharing resources, ideas, and driving forward changes in practice within their organisations. The champions have shared remarkable practices to improve how adopted children stay in touch with their birth relatives. Examples include supporting children's social workers in creating personalised contact plans pre-adoption. Some areas are reviewing all contact plans, both new and historic, and offering regular reviews to support families.

Key Achievements

-  The Adoption England conference in September 2023 hosted over 500 delegates both online and in person, marking the first hybrid conference to kick-start the project and raise awareness of this important topic.
-  Adoption England produced resources to support maintaining relationships, based on the University of Sydney New South Wales' Fostering Lifelong Connections project.
-  Fourteen free, open-access webinars have been held to date, with a total of 5197 sign-ups. These webinars involve experts by experience and explore key areas of how culture change can be achieved for children when staying in touch with birth relatives or those important to them.
-  Closed champion workshops have been conducted to collate and share practice and resources.
-  Recruited 187 culture change champions from across the sector who come together in Communities of Practice (CoPs) every six weeks.

Future Projects

Assessing the impact of this culture change work is challenging across the adoption system. Over the next year, a researcher will begin mapping changes across England. The project will continue to host open-access webinars and CoPs, and will offer training for other parts of the sector such as Cafcass and Principal Social Workers.

“As a Guardian, I have found this session helpful and informative. Recommendations and considerations to the court on EP placements, and the importance of acknowledging feelings for carers and birth parents, will definitely be enhanced after having the insight shared today.”

- Cafcass court advisor

“These sessions are so helpful for us thinking about this for our adopted child.”

- Adoptive parent

“Love these groups, they help so much with the sharing of ideas and resources!”

- Group member

“Relationships are key. It would be making sure social workers have as much info as possible about birth parents.”

- Birth relative

Birth Family Mapping

Support for birth families where adoption is planned or has taken place is inconsistent and sometimes difficult to access. However, to better support children's needs to understand their identity and maintain links with their birth relatives after adoption, this support is essential.

Adoption England commissioned the Family Rights Group (FRG) to create the first interactive online map to source support for birth relatives if a child has been adopted or if there is a possible plan for a child to be adopted. FRG has collated data from across England, identifying the type of support available and where it is offered. Birth relatives can search via their postcode to find available support in their area.

A key challenge is keeping the map up to date, and its ongoing development is a critical area of discussion for the maintaining relationships strategic priority.

The map is due to go live soon! Watch for the announcement on the Adoption England website and share it with all your networks.

“A map that allows birth families to search for support is a fantastic idea. I wish something like this had existed for me. I had no idea where to turn or how to find help. I was so ashamed I didn't want to tell people what had happened to me. This map would have allowed me to find help quickly and easily, and to speak to organisations who would understand what I had been through and know how to help me.”

- Birth parent

Lifelong Links

Adoption England commissioned the Family Rights Group (FRG) to adapt the Lifelong Links model, initially used in local authorities to maintain children's relationships if they are in care, to be piloted in adoption. During the first phase of work over the past year, consultations have been conducted with many individuals and groups, including adopted people, Adopteens, birth relatives, RAAs, local authorities, adoptive parents, and legal representatives. These consultations have provided insights into the complex legal framework around adoption and how families access support, informing the necessary adaptations to the model.

“Lifelong Links approach within adoption is a necessity from the beginning.”

- Birth relatives

“Information is key. The right information supports understanding rather than blame.”

- Adopted person

“Guidance in the adoption process is very much about a clean break and most adopters are scared to rock the boat – too important, too much to lose. This could finally shift that balance.”

- Adopters

The model is due to go live in September, with four RAAs linked with the Lifelong Links services in their local authority to support the FRG in using the adapted model in an adoption setting. RAAs will recruit a total of 10 families in the pilot phase, with an academic partner (University of Sussex, Dr Tam Cane) to evaluate the adapted model.

Improving Adoption Services for Adults (IASA)

Adoption England commissioned the University of East Anglia (UEA) to form the IASA project team, to work with stakeholders and people with lived experience to help address the gaps in support and services for adopted adults and their relatives.

“Adoptees must be the focus around which decisions are made, and this cannot happen unless their views are heard. The only way to successfully do this is to have adoptees, in this case specifically older adoptees, involved in the process from the beginning. This is why the IASA is so important.”

- Adult adoptee





As a result of this work, Adoption England commissioned FamilyConnect on a national scale. Launched by the national charity Family Action in 2020, it is delivered through their adoption support agency, PAC-UK. The resource was originally developed to support people looking to learn about their history and family members and gain an understanding of why they were separated from their birth family.

FamilyConnect is providing an 18-month pilot of funded intermediary services for adult adoptees and birth relatives who were affected by adoption pre-1976, who wish to reconnect with each other. The service has also been expanded to offer a specialist telephone advice line and additional online resources for birth relatives and professionals.

The project team are reviewing and updating the 2005 Practice Guidance on Access to Records and Intermediary Services. Partnering with PAC-UK, the project team has completed consultations with adopted adults and birth relatives, including independent groups, to provide their perspectives on proposed amendments. IASA has also worked with a core group of professionals to collate case studies and advise on changes needed in the guidance. The complexity of the post-commencement legislation is a key challenge in ensuring quality services are provided.

The suspension of the Death Enquiry Service once provided by the NHS during the Covid pandemic, is a significant concern. This service is a tool used in tracing and intermediary work to help adopted people and birth relatives understand if their family members are still living. This is particularly important to the pre-November 1975 group under the JCHR report of forced adoption. IASA continues to lobby, with the support of the Department for Education (DfE) and Adoption England, for this service to be reinstated.

Key Achievements

-  Submitted a paper to the DfE on the legislative changes needed.
-  Engaged in discussions with the DfE on the proposed changes.
-  Practice guidance and principles are due to be completed by December 2024.
-  A new service is now in place to provide some intermediary services for adopted adults on an 18-month pilot basis.



Outcome 3:

Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided nationally and regionally.

Voice and Influence - Adopted Adults

Adoption England work closely with an established Adopted Persons Reference Group who meet quarterly, chaired by PAC-UK. This group provides essential advice and feedback on the programme of work and plays a crucial role in advancing key priorities.

“I have been part of the Adopted Person’s Reference Group, using my lived experiences to help make sure that policies and practices are properly put in place for the next generation of children in care and adoption.”

- Adult adoptee and reference group member

National Adoption Week (October 2023)

National Adoption Week 2023 brought together adopted people from different generations to celebrate how adoption has changed over the years. We heard directly from people adopted between the 1960s and 2010s about the positive impact adoption has had on their lives. They shared how modern adoption encourages people to explore and celebrate their family history, helping them form a positive sense of identity.

As part of National Adoption Week, Adoption England commissioned PAC-UK to host several events with adopted people and birth parents. PAC-UK highlighted the films they produced, “Messages for Adoptive Parents from Adoptees and Birth Parents,” and held an in-person event for adopted adults in London. The film can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youcanadopt.co.uk/naw/>.

“I was honoured to be a guest in a panel discussion about the film, Be-Longing. I was raised in a transracial foster care placement and later adopted. I spoke to foster carers and professionals about how important stability and routine are for a child in foster care. The child needs to be at the centre of conversations, reassured, spoken to, and heard.”

- Adult adoptee

Voice and Influence - Children and Young People

Strategy

An easy-read, youth version of the three-year Adoption England strategy has been created to better communicate our aims to improve services for adopted children, young people and their families. The strategy can be found on our Adoption England website here: <https://adoptionengland.co.uk/voice-and-influence-resources>.

National Commissioning

Three young people were involved in the commissioning process for the national adopter recruitment campaign contract. The young people's panel devised their own questions for the tender and then scored digital submissions, contributing a 10% weighting in the final decision.

Voice and Influence Practice Network

With the support of the Adoption England team, the Voice and Influence Practice Network was launched in October 2023. The network meets monthly, bringing together practitioners and managers from RAAs and partner organisations who are engaged in or developing Voice and Influence work within their regions. The network has discussed topics including participation theory and practice, levels of influence, engagement strategies, collaboration across regions, engaging local authority partners, and evidencing impact.

Through the network, we have begun planning an in-person event for young people later in the year. Additionally, the network has facilitated discussion and networking opportunities for members, resulting in the sharing of challenges, ideas and resources, and supported colleagues to connect and collaborate outside of the network meetings.

Team Development Days

Two RAAs have taken up the offer of a team development day this year. These customised days helped the teams create a Voice and Influence development action plan, including key outcomes, milestones, recruitment, and delivery plans. The days also facilitated discussions about the benefits and challenges of engaging children and young people in Voice and Influence activities such as service development and recruitment.

Following a Voice and Influence development day last year, one RAA successfully launched their new children and young people's Voice and Influence group this year. This group is now working on a project focused on support in education for adopted young people.

Voice and Influence Quarterly Report

This year, RAA leaders agreed to start collecting qualitative feedback and data on their Voice and Influence activity with all four key stakeholder groups: children and young people, adopted adults, birth family members, and adopters. The first quarterly report covered the period from January to March 2024, with 10 RAAs submitting responses.

The responses highlighted key areas for development based on stakeholder feedback, including adoption support, transitions to adulthood, and maintaining relationships. Some responses provided excellent examples of how Voice and Influence engagement activities have influenced service development. In one RAA, young people were instrumental in developing a revised Contact Plan to improve the regular review of contact arrangements. In another, engagement with adopted adults led to the creation of a new post focused on this area of work.

Next Steps

Young Persons Forum

Adoption England will launch and facilitate a new regular online group for adopted young people aged 14 to 21. This national youth forum will influence the work of Adoption England, as well as having the opportunity to initiate their own projects and ensure young people's voices are contributing to the development of the national agenda.

Key Achievement

- Establishing the Voice and Influence Practice Network, which supports RAAs with the skills, knowledge and tools to develop and expand meaningful Voice and Influence provision.

Key Challenges

- For RAAs, the main challenges are capacity and resources to develop and deliver this work.

Voice and Influence - Birth Parents

The Birth Parent Reference Group continues to meet quarterly, and is chaired and supported by PAC-UK. They provide crucial feedback for the programme of work and influence the priorities of the work.

The reference group expressed a strong desire to have their views considered in the matching of children with adopters, therefore within the development of the matching standards, we established a specific standard to address birth family and child involvement. This initiative received positive feedback by all parties involved.

"Speaking to colleagues nationally about how they are embedding the standards, I have received several comments about how they are now making more effort to engage birth families. For example, one person spoke about how a birth parent has started helping with the life story and they've realised how creative this parent is. Others have spoken about it being a good reminder to ensure the views, wishes and feelings are properly captured."

- Ruby Shah, National Family Finding Lead at Adoption England



“As a birth parent with lived experience, it is empowering to be given a voice, both at local and national levels. Birth parents are often excluded from conversations about adoption despite having a lot to contribute.”

- Birth parent

“Seeing us as the missing part of the ‘adoption triangle’ is a huge step in the right direction to make adoption services work for everyone, including birth families. This was especially true when we had the chance to share our stories during National Adoption Week—a week that has historically excluded our voices.”

- Birth parent

“Being involved for nearly three years has helped me build confidence and support other first parents. Being part of the group has really opened my eyes to how we have started supporting and involving first parents in changes in adoption.”

- Birth parent

Birth Parents: Moving Forward, Not Moving On

Birth Parents: Moving Forward, Not Moving On, was a well-attended online event with 160 participants. Angela Frazer Wicks, MBE, hosted the event and discussed with other birth parents, including Kristy Holt and Andy Coppenhall, what has helped them to move forward after losing a child to adoption. They talked about their own strategies and what has been helpful, such as individual and group support, contact, and looking to the future. Andy also focused on birth fathers and the barriers they face in accessing support.

“As a practitioner, it is very positive that we are hearing more from birth mothers and their needs. Adoption planning should, in the interests of the child, consider long-term implications, the language used, collating meaningful information for life story work, meetings between birth parents and adopters, and better support for birth parents and birth relatives. Thank you so much to all the speakers and PAC-UK. I feel honoured and privileged to have had the opportunity to hear your stories and views, and I have learned a great deal.”

- Event participant

Adoptees Social Media Takeover

The Adoptees service, designed and developed by adopted teenagers in collaboration with PAC-UK, aims to support and connect adopted teens. Adopted teenagers from across Yorkshire & the Humber took over our social media feed for #YouCanAdopt for a day of blogs, Q&A sessions, voice recordings, and engaging content.

Historic Adoption: Experiences and Reflections

Adoptee Jan Shine, birth mother Jill Killington, and researcher Dr Michael Lambert, shared their experiences and reflections on historic adoption. They discussed their involvement in the demand for an apology and the subsequent JCHR enquiry, addressing the impact of adoption and the responses to the enquiry.

June 2023 Early Permanence Conference

Claire Mason, a researcher from the Centre for Child and Family Research at the University of Lancaster, attended the conference with a birth parent to deliver a workshop about the Giving Hope project and the Born into Care research led by Lancaster University in partnership with the Rees Centre and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. Following the publication of the findings, the HOPE Mums worked with the team and charity Birth Companions, to develop a new intervention, The HOPE Boxes, designed to mitigate trauma to birth parents and babies following separation. The team also published best practice standards around the removal of a baby soon after birth.

Working with Adoptive Parents

Adoption England meet quarterly with an adopter reference group led by the DfE, who provide helpful feedback and advice. In addition, Adoption UK are involved with various working groups to ensure adoptive parents have a voice in the development of work.

Adoption UK publish an annual Adoption Barometer which reports on adoptive parents' experiences and suggestions for improvement. The report recommends quality standards for preparation, approvals and matching, and to improve support for prospective adopters during matching.

In response, Adoption England have worked on national practice standards for:

- Early Permanence, which has been implemented.
- Matching, with a published learning programme that's ongoing.
- Adopter Journey, which is due to launch in autumn 2024.

Looking forward, Adoption England have commissioned Adoption UK to map adopter engagement, voice and influence work, identity good practice, and provide recommendations on how successful approaches could be embedded to influence RAAs, the wider system and the DfE through the adopter reference group.





Outcome 4:

Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.

Early Permanence (EP)

The Early Permanence (EP) Working Group, chaired by Vicky Davidson Boyd (Adoption Tees Valley), drives the delivery of the EP workplan for 2023-2025. Stakeholders have identified five key priorities:

1. The Adoption England website hosts a library of quality-assured EP resources.
2. There is an accurate national data dashboard for EP arrangements.
3. Parents and carers receive high-quality support throughout the EP process.
4. Practitioners are confident in seeking EP arrangements, and there are enough carers willing to consider EP.
5. All stakeholders value and support EP arrangements to benefit children.

- Pan-regional EP guidance for practice
- Guidance for family time/maintaining relationships in EP arrangements
- Research into the costings of EP arrangements
- Films for EP carers
- A book for children
- Introduction training videos for newly qualified social workers

This work is ongoing and overseen by the EP Practice and Service Development Group, chaired by Cathy Sowden (Together for Adoption).

The group has also continued to run the virtual workshop programme, supporting practitioners to implement and embed the EP national practice standards launched last year, sharing practice and resources.

Key Achievements

According to ASG data, over the last 12 months we have seen an increase in EP arrangements ranging from 7-40% of adoption figures. This has been a continued increase over the last three years, and the nationally agreed dataset continues to improve the quality and consistency of EP data regarding children and adopters.

We have developed a library of quality-assured EP resources on the Adoption England website, which can be found here: <https://adoptionengland.co.uk/early-permanence-adoption-resources>. Some of these resources were created by the grant-funded EP projects, including:

Feedback on EP Projects and Workshops

"This is excellent, and to have a framework is exciting and long overdue. The eight standards will help support the work we are doing and provide a national baseline for practice. I am looking forward to some focused work to look at how these are implemented/working within LAs and RAAs and the interface between them."

- Feedback from an attendee at the National Standards Workshop.

"The Legal briefing gave me lots to take back to my LA around our challenge to the court and also about our need to consider EP at every opportunity along the child's journey."

- Feedback from a social worker at the Legal Workshop during the EP Conference.

Therapeutic Support Workshop for EP Parents and Carers

Colleagues from Adopt East and Adoption Partnership South East co-delivered a workshop on therapeutic support for EP carers and adoptive parents, sharing the positive impact their EP projects are having in their areas.

"The approach can positively impact birth parents' ability to engage with providing information to their child, even when the care plan progresses to adoption."

- Feedback from a social worker on the therapeutic support EP project.

Our Priorities for the Coming 12 Months

- Working with family justice boards to promote the benefits of EP arrangements and provide consistency of practice across England.
- Continuing to hear from experts by experience to help shape EP practice.
- Reviewing how the EP National Standards have been embedded into practice.

Matching Practice Development Group.

Adoption England continue to run the bi-monthly Community of Practice group for Family Finding Leads. The group is well-attended and provides an engaged and active forum for discussions related to family finding, including common challenges and best practices. The format ensures that members can work through issues collaboratively and benefit from shared experiences and insights.

National Practice Matching Standards

The National Practice Matching Standards were launched in May 2024 following extensive consultation with experts by experience and across the sector. Bitesize sessions, as part of the National Practice Matching Standard Learning Programme, offer an opportunity to learn about various topics related to family finding and matching. They will combine:





- Practice experience.
- Research-based evidence.
- Insights from experts with lived experiences of adoption.



Activity and Fun Days

Adoption England continue to fund national adoption activity days and pan-regional fun days. These events are a valuable family finding tool, especially for priority children. Event providers collect feedback from attendees, including prospective adopters, foster carers, and social workers, and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Key insights:




-  83% of prospective adopters reported that they felt the event was excellent.
-  139 children attended the events, including 37 sibling groups.
-  115 adoptive households attended.
-  93 expressions of interests were generated.

A formal evaluation of these activity and fun days is underway.

Agency Decision Maker Training

Continuing from last year, Adoption England commissioned CoramBAAF to deliver Adoption Agency Decision Maker (ADM) training for local authorities. The aim of this training is to provide a safe and supportive forum to bring ADMs together. Many ADMs find the role isolating and describe entering it with little or no preparation. This training helps to equip them with the knowledge and confidence to fulfil this important function.

Key insights:

-  15 sessions have been delivered to 173 ADMs.
-  97% of participants reported that the content was very useful (73%) or useful (24%).
-  96% of participants reported that the training strongly met (60%) or met (36%) the learning objectives.

“Good to have time to think through the complexities.”

“Interesting, informative, and engaging.”



“Case law was extremely helpful to hear and consider.”

- Training attendees

Just Home Programme

Adoption England commissioned The Staff College to deliver the Just Home programme to four RAAs over a two-year period. Just Home aims to explore the needs of global majority children in care, their lives and life-chances, their traumas, and their needs. The programme provides a valuable opportunity to address these issues in a safe space across the permanence teams in a region. Attendance is encouraged from representatives from fostering, adoption, and care planning teams to secure long-term cultural change in this area of practice.

Progress:

-  79 attendees have completed the full programme.
-  An additional 30 attendees are scheduled to go through the programme later in 2024.

“I would say that it helped me to really reflect on considering culture and identity in interim and final care plans, and how we actively promote and support this and not just make tokenistic statements. Also, it emphasized having more direct, active challenges to foster placement offers if not a cultural match, rather than just settling for ‘being happy we have a placement.’ Ensuring we are encouraging conversations to reflect on how a child’s culture and identity can be actively promoted, and considering the locality and community where they will be placed, is crucial. I found the other areas of the course pertinent to adoption interesting. It helped me relate to our own processes in our areas, such as the recruitment of global majority adopters, being aware of the discrimination and experiences they face daily, and being mindful of that across all parts of interaction with global majority children, parents, carers, and families.”

- Feedback from a local authority attendee



Anti-Racist Framework for Decision Making (AFDiT) & Transracial Matching Virtual Training Resources

About AFDiT

Dr Tam Cane, from the University of Sussex, has been commissioned by Adoption England to lead the creation of AFDiT – a groundbreaking framework designed to assist in transitioning children from minoritised racial and ethnic groups into transracial adoptive families. This framework is being co-created with social work practitioners and individuals with lived experience of transracial adoption. It aims to provide comprehensive guidelines that help social workers understand, address, and protect the identity needs of racialised and minoritised ethnic children moving into transracial adoptive families.

- For Prospective Adopters: A series of films sharing the lived experiences of transracial adoption, including perspectives from adopted individuals, adopters, and birth family members. These films discuss their feelings and thoughts on how children can be supported.
- For Practitioners: A series of presentations by Dr Tam Cane to help practitioners develop a deeper understanding of the needs of children placed transracially. This includes recognising a child's identity needs and the significance of these needs.

Transracial Matching Virtual Training Resources

Dr Tam Cane is also developing a range of virtual training resources to enhance understanding of transracial adoptions. These resources include:

Matching Projects

Matching funding was awarded in 2022/23 to several adoption agencies to develop matching practices. The projects are ongoing and are now beginning to show positive outcomes.

- Placing Children with Disabilities: One project led to a research report on placing children with disabilities, which is informing the development of this initiative in the South West. The report can be found here: <https://www.adoptionengland.co.uk/matching/placing-children-with-disabilities-adoptive-families>.

- Talking Adoption Films: A series of films titled "Talking Adoption" has been produced to support prospective adopters. These films cover common additional needs seen in adopted children, such as foetal alcohol syndrome, blood-borne diseases, and developmental delay. They also address various parenting topics, including the early days of placement, trauma, education, and attachment. The films are available on the Adoption England website here: <https://www.adoptionengland.co.uk/matching-resources>.
- Data Tracking Improvement: Many projects have identified the need to improve data tracking to understand their impact better. From the data captured so far, 21 matches have been made and 23 expressions of interest have been generated.



Sibling Matching in the Southeast:

Adoption Partnership South East's project focuses on the matching of siblings. Here is a case study of one of the successes from their work:

Mary and Paul (pseudonyms) made an enquiry with APSE in November 2022 and were open to considering adopting siblings from the beginning. They undertook the usual Stage 1 and Stage 2 training programme, and their assessment was completed in December 2023. During this period, they undertook the bespoke 'Joy and Challenge of Parenting Siblings through Adoption' course in September 2023, facilitated by Adoption UK and commissioned by APSE as part of the matching project. Following this

training, and before approval, they decided they wanted to consider siblings only. In November 2023, they were approached about a sibling group of two children and subsequently linked. The matching panel will take place early in 2024. The applicants wish to attend the peer support group arranged to start in April, and a consultation for the professionals with an independent psychologist is booked, so the placement can be fully supported from the beginning.

Several of the projects have recruited a Project Lead who coordinates matching activity across a wide region to improve matching opportunities for children. These case studies show how their work has resulted in matches for children who may otherwise have continued to wait.

A Coffee Morning was held in July 2023, which generated a very fruitful discussion with adopters about matching processes and children available for adoption. Following the event, the Matching Manager had several conversations with various adopters. One particular couple described how they had been waiting for some time and the type of child they were looking for. Their criteria were more flexible than initially indicated, which led the Matching Manager to think of a boy who had been waiting for a link for several months.

At a recent virtual profiling event facilitated by the Project Lead, a profile was shared of a three-and-a-half-year-old boy who, within his early life, had experienced over 21 placement moves. These included changes in placements, hospital admissions, and moves between different family members. An approved prospective adoptive couple from the partnership RAA attended the profiling event and felt an instant connection with the little boy. They made an expression of interest following the event, and the link was explored between the two RAAs. A successful family finding visit took place a few weeks later, with all parties feeling this was a very good match. After a successful matching panel and transition, the child was placed with his prospective adoptive family in September 2023. The adoption application was submitted to court in December 2023, and we are currently awaiting a court date for the adoption application to be considered.



Outcome 5:

Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it

Adoption Support

National Adoption Support Programme

Adoption England established the National Adoption Support Programme to oversee and steer three strands of work via sub groups:

- Improvement of adoption support practice
- Development of multidisciplinary approaches
- Exploration of pan-regional and national commissioning options

The programme involves key stakeholders and experts by experience, aiming to navigate pathways between different sectors, unblock barriers, and innovate new ways of working.

Improvement of Adoption Support

Adoption Support Data

Understanding the range of work undertaken across the country around adoption support is important to better respond to the needs of adopted children and families. A national dataset on adoption support work was developed in early 2023, and 7 RAAs are piloting the data collection. Whilst this is beneficial, there are many challenges gathering the data for some RAAs. Further work is being progressed during the next year with Coram-i, with the aim for a first data collection in April 2025.

Adoption Support Plan

The group have worked with CoramBAAF in consultation with a wide cross sector group of stakeholders including Adoption UK, to develop a new Adoption Support Plan, This is currently being piloted by 4 RAAs with a full rollout planned from January 2025.

Early Support Offer and The Purple Book

Recognising that the early period of a child's adoptive placement is crucial to establishing attachments, becoming a family, and confidence as a new parent, the working group have produced resources to support families in the first 12-18 months of child moving in with their family. This includes guidance for practitioners, providing a clear focus and purpose to support them enable adopters to act as the main therapeutic agents, while helping them to build resilience through an effective social network.

Additionally, a reflective workbook called The Purple Book has been developed to help parents reflect, learn and understand their child. It is given to families at the point they are linked to a child, providing information and guidance that will support them to become a family, and for them to use throughout their parenting journey. They can use the book with their support team, to identify and access support they might need now or in the future.

This early support core offer aims to:

- be preventative and support the building blocks of parenting in adoption,
- support families to start to feel confident as therapeutic parents,
- build resilience through effective social network and peer support.
- be responsive to individual needs with access to a wide range of multi-agency support.
- offer consistency of support across England for families adopting a child from another region.

Developing Multidisciplinary Approaches

Adoption England is working with partners across the country to pilot seven innovative multidisciplinary and multiagency approaches to improve adoption support for adopted children and their families. This two-year programme is funded by the Department for Education (DfE). The programme aims to create partnerships between regional adoption agencies, integrated care boards, and education and health providers, bringing together the knowledge and expertise of different agencies and professionals. The objective is to streamline assessment processes for families, enabling them to access the right support for their adopted child or children more effectively and efficiently.

The programme supports the development of the following regional projects:

- In partnership with Oxfordshire County Council ATTACH Team and local Virtual Schools, a multidisciplinary therapeutic team provides services for multiple needs, including educational, psychological, and sensory integration. Parents have expressed that they finally feel supported after years of seeking help.
- North East: Adopt North East, Adoption Tees Valley, and Adopt Coast to Coast, in partnership with the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board, aim to create a team of specialists to deliver high-quality multidisciplinary assessment and support for adopted children and their families, initially aged 7-11 years old.
- Adopt South: In partnership with Southampton University, this project aims to create a multidisciplinary service that holistically considers children's needs and offers families specialist and streamlined support. One parent shared that they felt really supported and better prepared to consider their child's perspective.

- North West: Adoption Counts, Adoption Now, Together for Adoption, Adoption in Merseyside, and Adoption Lancashire & Blackpool are expanding a multiagency model to provide assessment, consultation, and therapeutic CAMHS and educational psychology services for adopted children, their parents, carers, and social workers.
- Adoption East Midlands: Working with local Virtual Schools, Education Psychology Services, and Nottinghamshire Youth Service, this project aims to develop a regional multidisciplinary team and service offer to support young people at high risk of family breakdown or with other additional risk factors. This case study highlights how Education Support Officers helped four children who had been out of education for up to two years reintegrate into school.

Four children who had been out of education for up to two years have been successfully supported back into school by Education Support Officers. This support included helping schools become more trauma-informed and better understanding the young people's needs. The Education Support Officer and the Virtual School co-delivered whole school training and assisted the family in accessing a reintegration plan for their children.

- Adoption Partnership South East: This project aims to expand the existing in-house therapeutic service across the entire regional adoption agency and improve partnerships between social care, education, and health to better understand the multiple needs of adopted children.
- One Adoption South Yorkshire: In partnership with the local Integrated Care Board, this project develops initial support services for children who may be affected by foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, providing practical advice and assistance to schools and parents.

National Commissioning

The National Adoption Commissioning Programme is a two-year initiative funded by the DfE to explore national and pan-RAA commissioning arrangements, aiming to provide better value for money in commissioning adoption support. The programme addresses multiple challenges in the adoption support commissioning landscape, with the main goals of improving the speed, quality, and consistency of adoption support services across the country.

In the first year of the programme, Adoption England achieved the following:

- Agreed on an implementation strategy with a clear vision for national and pan-RAA commissioning of adoption support.
- Established a National Adoption Commissioning Team consisting of core staff members, regional commissioning members, and regional champions.
- Allocated funding for two regional and one national innovation project.
- Made significant progress towards improving our collective understanding of the needs of adoptive families.



Research and Evaluation

Adoption England has appointed a research partner, a collaborative partnership between the Institute of Public Care (IPC) and the University of East Anglia (UEA), to help evaluate our work and capture the learning from it.

The Institute of Public Care (IPC) is a research and development unit within Oxford Brookes University. Under the leadership of Professor Katy Burch, IPC has developed a reputation for high-quality commissioned research relating to children and families, with a focus on national adoption studies.

The University of East Anglia (UEA) has a renowned adoption-focused team within the Centre for Research on Children & Families (CRCF). The team is led by Professor Beth Neil, who has an international profile and reputation for adoption-related research, including post-adoption contact, birth relatives' perspectives, post-adoption support, and adoptive parent recruitment and matching.



Evaluations Led by IPC

- Evaluation of Multidisciplinary Models: Final report due in May/June 2025
- Evaluation of Activity Days: Report due in summer 2024
- Evaluation of Regional Early Permanence and Matching Projects
- Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the National Adoption Strategy (2021-24)
- Evaluation of the National Commissioning Programme

Other Research Projects

Evaluation of Case Holding Responsibility

Coram-i evaluated the practice where local authorities delegate case holding responsibility to the Regional Adoption Agency at the point when the formal authorisation to place a child for adoption is agreed. Traditionally, the case responsibility is retained by the child's social worker from the local authority until an adoption order is granted. This evaluation helps to better understand the benefits and drawbacks of this practice. The evaluation can be found on the Adoption England website here: <https://adoptionengland.co.uk/research>

Budget and Forward Planning

The work detailed in this report is funded and supported by the Department for Education (DfE). Below is a breakdown of annual funds.

Annual Budget from DfE Funding (2023/24)

DFE GRANT	AMOUNT AWARDED
National Team 2024/25	£500,000
Early Permanence 2024/25	£1,000,000
Adoption Recruitment 2024/25	£500,000
Matching 2024/25	£2,000,000
National Commissioning 2024/25	£1,500,000
Centres of Excellence 2024/25	£2,000,000
Total	£7,500,000

Forward Planning for 2024/25 Budget

DFE GRANT	AMOUNT AWARDED
National Team 2024/25	£500,000
Early Permanence 2024/25	£1,000,000
Adoption Recruitment 2024/25	£500,000
Matching 2024/25	£2,000,000
National Commissioning 2024/25	£2,000,000
Centres of Excellence 2024/25	£3,000,000
Total	£9,000,000

Forward Planning for 2024/25 Budget

- 13 matching projects
- 9 Early Permanence projects
- Recruitment campaign activity
- 7 multidisciplinary projects
- Activity days and pan-regional play days
- National and pan-regional commissioning projects
- Programmes supporting 'Openness in Adoption'
- Amplifying the voices of experts by experience
- Research and evaluation activities



Adoption
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regional adoption agencies working together

