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Council for Voluntary  
Adoption Agencies:  
Capacity Building Insights  
Research Report

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# Contents

<b>Contents</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>About the research</b>	<b>4</b>
Research Objectives	4
Methodology	4
Participating Agencies	5
<b>Adoption Policy Landscape</b>	<b>6</b>
Policy	6
Department for Education Expansion Grants	7
The future	8
<b>Understanding the VAA Sector</b>	<b>9</b>
A SECTOR UNITED BY PASSION	9
SHAPE OF THE SECTOR	9
<b>Understanding the VAA Workforce</b>	<b>12</b>
Demographics	13
SPECIALIST SKILLS: DEALING WITH COMPLEX NEEDS	13
HIGH LEVELS OF EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION	14
SKILLS & CAREER DEVELOPMENT	17
ROUTES INTO THE SECTOR	18
<b>Effective management</b>	<b>22</b>
LEADERSHIP	22
<b>Perceptions of the ‘future’</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>FINAL THOUGHTS</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Thank you</b>	<b>28</b>

# Introduction

The VAA sector is united by a desire to deliver the best possible outcomes for children.

In business terminology ‘capacity’ describes the potential output of goods or services in a given period of time. In the case of VAAs it describes something far less cold and industrial, namely the ability to create families; the ultimate loving and safe environment for children, something most of us took for granted.

VAAs give a great many children, who otherwise might never have a family, a vital second chance to fulfil their potential and at the same time give prospective parents the strength and confidence to take on one of the greatest, most selfless, but also potentially rewarding, challenges. It is difficult to conceive of a more valuable or necessary service.

Despite many qualities in common – notably an engaged, committed, experienced and predominantly female workforce – VAAs are diverse in terms of size, history and business model. Capacity building grants and a volatile market have further spurred innovation and collaboration within the sector, though at the same time this has increased competition between VAAs and alternative models.

This report highlights the great value inherent within the sector, and also some of the key challenges, particularly around an older more experienced workforce and an attendant concern regarding succession and the future makeup of the workforce.

# About the research

The Department for Education (DfE) wants the voluntary adoption agency sector to increase capacity, with the aim of more than doubling the number of successful adoptions delivered through the sector, from 800 to 2,000 per year by 2016.

The capacity building funds from the DfE, administered by the Council for Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA), present a rare opportunity for major progress in addressing the wide range of challenges faced by the voluntary adoption agency (VAA) sector.

This research project was commissioned by the CVAA as part of the DfE funding grants available to English agencies for work on the tasks crucial to scaling up the number of potential adopters and scaling up workforce and capacity training.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

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The primary purpose of this project was to **generate a shared understanding of the VAA sector.**

In order to achieve this, the following research objectives were identified:

- Auditing the existing skills, resources and structures of the current sector workforce
- Revealing levels of engagement and satisfaction within the workforce
- Understanding the way the sector measures effectiveness
- Understanding employee pathways into the sector, and those promoting retention and development
- Identifying the 'best in class' and how to overcome challenges in spreading excellence across the sector

## METHODOLOGY

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In order to answer the above objectives, the following research methodology was developed:

- **CEO interviews**
  - 22 CEO interviews were conducted, discussing each VAA agency in detail and perceptions of challenges for the future
- **Employee survey**
  - A 20 minute online questionnaire was completed by n=605 employees from a range of VAAs
  - The survey included questions on employee demographics, satisfaction, professional experience and qualifications, as well as future plans and expectations of the sector
- **Agency profile survey**
  - 21 VAAs completed a detailed agency profile survey
- **Ethnographic visits**
  - 10 half day visits were undertaken to a representative sample of 10 VAAs

- Sample design took into consideration size, age and turnover of agency as well as geographical location and organisational offer

## PARTICIPATING AGENCIES

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The following agencies participated fully with all stages of the research:

Action for Children, , Adopters for Adoption, Adoption Focus, Adoption Matters North West, After Adoption, ARC Adoption NE, Barnado's Adoption, Caritas Care, CCS Adoption, Coram (London), Coram Cambridgeshire, DFW Adoption, Families for Children, Family Futures, Intercountry Adoption Centre, Adoption, Nugent Care, Parents and Children Together (PACT), SSAFA – Adoption service for Military Families, St Francis' Children's Society (SFCS) and TACT Adoption..

The following agencies provided responses to the employee survey but were unable to respond to the Agency Profile Survey:

AdoptionPlus, Adopt Together – Faith in Families and New Leaf (New Leaf were also unable to provide a CEO interview)

The following agencies were unable to participate in the research:

Family Care and Yorkshire Adoption Agency

What is a VAA?

Voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) recruit and assess prospective adopters; they create matches for children who are in the care of a local authority, and then are paid by the local authority for doing so. All VAAs are registered with Ofsted.

A typical adoption process for may include:

- Many adopters approaching VAAs have already attempted to find a child through their local authority. They may reach the VAA feeling frustrated with the adoption process. Staff offer hope to potential adopters and 'sow the seed' for considering different types of children.
- Adopters are registered and checked to see if they are emotionally and financially ready to have a child in their life. Staff provide personalised training and support to adopters to unlock their potential as parents.
- VAA staff use expert knowledge to match a child with adoptive parents.
- A child is found and placed with his/her new family. Specialist ongoing support and therapy is provided to child and parent(s) as they settle in to their new lives together.

# Adoption Policy Landscape

In order to understand the VAA sector and its workforce it is important to consider the wider forces impacting upon practice. There are a variety of external factors over which the sector has very little control. Policy changes introduced in 2013 sought to increase the numbers of adopters and to reduce the wait for children with adoption orders, leading to the offering of expansion grants to VAAs by the Department for Education to the sum of £16m. These grants helped generate new agencies, expand others and generally increased capacity and competition within the sector. Since that time there has been a significant reduction in the number of children put forward for adoption in part due to a number of high profile court rulings. In this more testing environment some agencies have thrived whilst others fight to survive.

## POLICY

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Since 2013 there have been changes to policy on adoption in the UK. Government reforms aimed to encourage more people to adopt and reduce the time it takes to do so. This was supported in law by Children and Families Act 2014. As part of these reforms the First4Adoption information line and website were launched in early 2013 as a 'one stop shop' for prospective adopters. This has proved a useful tool for some agencies in recruiting adopters with minimal outgoings.

However, after two years of increases in the number of children being placed with adoptive families, since 2014 there has been significant drop off in children put forward for adoption. This has directly impacted the number of children VAAs have to place. Figures released by the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) illustrate the reduction; In the three months to June 2014, there were 960 initial decisions to place a child for adoption, compared with 1,830 in the three months to September 2013<sup>1</sup>. This drop is in part due to the influence of a number of high profile court judgements, most notably Re B and Re B-S<sup>2</sup>. The legal rulings have led to confusion around adoption law, with local authorities sometimes misinterpreting the judgements as having fundamentally changed the law.

*"There is a lot of uncertainty in the adoption world at the moment. Judges are clamping down."*

**VAA CEO**

During these rulings 'the recurrent inadequacy of the analysis and reasoning put forward in support of the case for adoption' was scorned by the president of the high court's family division Sir James Munby<sup>3</sup>. The message filtered down to local authorities is that adoption is

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-30002988>

<sup>2</sup> Re B and Re B-S both are important court cases involving family law and child welfare. [http://www.familylaw.co.uk/news\\_and\\_comment/adoption-myth-buster-re-b-and-re-b-s#.VYumdfm6eM8](http://www.familylaw.co.uk/news_and_comment/adoption-myth-buster-re-b-and-re-b-s#.VYumdfm6eM8)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2014/sep/25/adoption-last-resort-local-authority>

the 'last resort', all other interventions should be pursued first and if a child could remain in foster care then 'that will do'. As a result fewer children have been coming through to VAAs for adoption. Those children that have been coming through are often 'harder to place', with babies and younger children with less complex needs finding families through local authority channels.

*"The types of children coming through are increasingly difficult. Even the children at the easier end of the spectrum have complex needs."*

**VAA CEO**

The fall in children available for adoption has prompted the National Adoption Leadership Board to issue clarification with their 'myth-busting' report, *Impact of Court Judgements on Adoption*, published in November 2014. It stresses that the legal test for adoption has not changed, and courts must be provided with expert, high quality, evidence-based analysis of all realistic options for a child and the arguments for and against each of these. It is yet to be seen what impact this clarification will have on the number of children available to VAAs.

In addition to the influence of court judgements, special guardianship orders are impacting upon the number of children coming through the system to VAAs. The BBC reported in May that the number of babies being made subject to special guardianship orders in England has tripled in two years<sup>4</sup>. This rise may suggest a shifting attitude in the 'appropriateness' of adoption as a course of action for a child.

## **DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION EXPANSION GRANTS**

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Back in August 2013, when there were more children waiting for adoption, the Department for Education attempted to tackle the 'chronic' shortage of adopters by making available a £16million grant fund to VAAs. These grants have changed the landscape of the VAA sector.

The grant fund aimed to increase the recruitment of adopters and create new ways of working to achieve this. As a result new skills have been added to the sector and roles in Business Development and Marketing have been created. From the grants 3 new agencies were founded and existing agencies expanded. Some agencies came together to apply for grants-relationships that for some continue to reap rewards.

Some agencies have perceived increased competition as a result of the grant funding, with older 'gentlemanly agreements' regarding sharing of resources and area divisions coming to an end. As some agencies have become more business-like and adopted expansion strategies there has inevitably been an impact on some smaller agencies. In the wake of reduced numbers of children available for adoption, those agencies who used the Department of Education grants to increase their cost base, have the added pressure of sustaining a larger business.

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) is a great opportunity for the VAA sector to achieve some stability, with contract work from LA's. From May 2015 the £19.3m fund has been available to adoptive families. To access the fund families will be assessed by LAs for their adoption support needs. By offering adoption support and gaining contracts with LAs, this could be a much needed source of income for VAAs looking to withstand any future changes in the number of children up for placement and the wider adoption landscape.

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<sup>4</sup> *More babies with 'special guardianship orders' as adoptions fall*, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32840224>

*"We have been committed to the growth agenda and we applied for expansion grants. But we have decided not to go for further growth. We are waiting to see how the market changes."*

**VAA CEO**

### **Partnership and reliance on local authorities**

A fundamental relationship within adoption in the UK, and a universal across the VAA sector, is agencies' reliance on local authorities for children to place. Any VAA's relationships with local authorities are framed by the number of children being put up for adoption- a number which is subject to change, and dependent on government policy and the judiciary (as discussed in the previous chapter).

For each child placed, the interagency fee is paid to the VAA. Agencies depend on this fee to varying degrees: some agencies rely heavily on the fee whilst others are 'topping up' by offering adoption support services or subsidising adoption through funding from their wider organisation for example.

The recent fall in the number of children available for placement and the importance of the interagency fee in financing an agency's activities, makes the sector 'competitive'. However, what makes the sector rather unique is how agencies are working together through the CVAA to benefit from government support whilst remaining in competition.

## **THE FUTURE**

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With a new Conservative government in office it is likely that further changes lie ahead for adoption in the UK. In May 2015 the Department of Education announced new measures to end delays for children awaiting adoption<sup>5</sup>. Arguing that adoption is happening at too small and localised a scale, the government will have new powers that will require councils to combine their adoption functions. It is difficult to predict how much of an impact councils working together will have on the VAA sector in the coming months and years, however it is likely that a decreased number of larger local authority agencies will make key relationships between VAA's and regionalised agencies even more important, potentially favouring larger VAA's and those with established partnership business models.

Furthermore through our research it has been revealed that there is some concern amongst employees, at a top level, regarding the future of the British adoption model. In the UK, children can be removed from parents without their consent if it is seen to be in the best interest of the child. It has been perceived that a media hardening to the practice of 'forcibly removing' children (ref) may cause the appropriation of a more 'European' model: authorities having less power to intervene and remove a child from their birth family<sup>6</sup>.

### Summary

Critical external factors acting upon the sector are unpredictable and subject to change. These external forces have had some positive impact: expansion grants have led to the creation of new agencies, a more diverse workforce and incorporation of new skills. However, the uncertainty caused by outside factors poses a challenge to agencies as they plan for the future.

The current climate and slow down due to high profile court judgements is unprecedented and driving rapid innovation within the sector. Business models are diversifying and in some cases collaboration is becoming a critical to future stability and success.

# Understanding the VAA Sector

## A SECTOR UNITED BY PASSION

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This research project focussed on the 25 VAA's operating across England. The VAA sector is home to a diverse range of business models and approaches.

Within the VAA sector we find much diversity, with some well-established agencies and others just celebrating their one year anniversaries. Many agencies have a long history and tradition of values based work, perhaps originating from a religious charity, whereas others have grown from offering specialist services or from other areas of care for children. At a basic level, there are those which are significantly larger and some with just a handful of employees, as well as those operating nationally, or in numerous areas of the country, as opposed to those focussed much more on their immediate local area.

Although there is much that divides agencies within the VAA sector, such as size, model and offering, there is also much that unites, primarily the motivation of the workforce for working in the sector. A passion for achieving the best outcomes for children is found throughout the sector and employees from top to bottom share these values. In addition, VAA employees are committed to ensuring that prospective adoptive parents have the best possible experience with their agency.

*"You've got to invest your heart, soul and love into adoption. It's a vocation"*

*"We recruit based on values not just competency. This is very important to us. This allows for continuity and staff stability"*

**VAA CEO**

*"A strength of this agency is our excellent first response. By the time adopters get to us they are often jaded by their experience with a local authority. We are 'sowing the seed' with parents that they should consider other kinds of children and many have been delighted with the outcome."*

**VAA CEO**

*"Ultimately, here we believe in doing something good for both parents and children."*

**VAA CEO**

Regardless of the origins, or founding intent, VAAs are also necessarily modern businesses fighting to survive within a competitive environment. While traditionally values based approaches have sometimes been perceived to be at odds with a strong business ethic, many VAAs successfully demonstrate the strengths of such an approach to business, and this report provides evidence of some of the benefits: a motivated workforce, a shared desire to provide a quality service and a willingness to collaborate. Despite this, it could be argued that there is still room for improvement in this area, and sector can likely continue to learn from other sectors and businesses utilising a value based approach.

## SHAPE OF THE SECTOR

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Such a diverse and dynamic sector can be difficult to treat as one coherent whole for the purposes of analysis. The extreme size range of VAAs studied presents a particular challenge

as this will inevitably impact on workforce composition with smaller agencies likely to rely on a multi-skilled, more generalist workforce, while larger agencies are in a position to recruit specialists and invest with a more strategic focus, perhaps at a cost to agility and flexibility. However, throughout this report we will try to draw out common themes and experiences from across the sector.

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF AGENCIES
<b>Size</b>	
Large (More than 50 employees)	5
Medium (25-59 employees)	9
Small (Up to 24 employees)	10
<b>Total turnover</b>	
Under £2million	8
£2-10 million	7
Over £10 million	6
<b>Turnover deriving from adoption</b>	
Up to 49%	7
50-100%	14

There is also a great degree of variety when it comes to the offering of VAAs, with some exclusively offering adoption services, including post-adoption support and therapeutic services, whereas others form part of larger charities or organisations offering a range of services to a range of audiences.

SERVICES OFFERED	NUMBER OF AGENCIES
Adoption & Adoption Support	15
Part of wider organisations, offer a wider range of services not relating to adoption	9

Throughout this research we visited, spoke to and surveyed the full range of models and it is important to note that it was not obvious that any one model present in the current VAA sector is any more effective or successful than others. Indeed, we rather see variety as a strength, both in terms of product offer and the resulting options available to potential adopters and additionally in terms of resilience for the sector overall.

VAAs operate across England, and often in more than one area. As part of the HR survey we asked agencies how many geographical areas they currently operate in. Responses of those agencies who participated are below:

AREAS OPERATED IN	NUMBER OF AGENCIES
1-2 areas	11
3-5 areas	6
More than 5 areas	5

More recently, as a result of the sector expansion grants awarded in 2014, a number of innovative models have emerged within the sector, bringing with them new and different challenges:

- **Adopters for Adoption offers a national adoption service, in contrast to the traditionally regional approach of VAAs**
- **Coram Cambridgeshire has been set up to combine both Coram staff and the LA adoption team in order for the VAA to perform the functions of both LA and VAA**
- **After Adoption has developed a new service for to find adopters for children that wait the longest by developing specific recruitment campaigns for individual children**
- **Effective collaborations have been launched between VAA's, such as that between Adoption Matters and Caritas Care, and a number of agencies made joint expansion grant applications.**

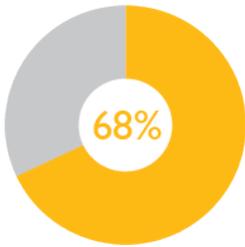
While the long term success of these initiatives remains to be seen, the ability of the sector to adapt and create potential new business models is clear.

#### **Summary**

Although the VAA sector is difficult to treat as a whole there is much that unites agencies across the board. One key theme encountered throughout our research was the passion that drives the sector, and the belief in the value of its work.

There is a huge amount of variety in terms of the current business models and approaches within the VAA sector today. All models have something to offer prospective adopters and children, and this research project did not conclude that any one model is more effective or successful than any others – indeed it is this diversity that enables the VAA sector to offer high quality services for children and adopters with a diverse set of needs and preferences, maximising the numbers of children that can be placed. Diversity will also prove invaluable as the adoption sector changes in the future.

# Understanding the VAA Workforce



68% response rate based on estimated size of sector

We estimate the VAA workforce to comprise 889 employees, based on 23 agencies providing a figure for their total number of employees. The employee survey conducted as part of this research achieved n=605 responses, representing a healthy 68% response rate amongst the participating agencies. The following figures are drawn from our own research findings, which we consider to be an accurate representation of the sector as a whole.

The majority of employees described themselves as being in non-management roles (70%), with 17% occupying middle management roles and 10% senior management. Just 3% of those surveyed described themselves as trainees.

The largest single job role within the VAA sector is that of the Social Worker, with just over half those surveyed describing their job role as such.

JOB ROLE	%
Social Worker	51
Admin Worker	17
Support Service Provider (e.g. therapeutic support, post adoption support)	9
Manager of social work services	3
Marketing/ Publicity	3
Finance	3
Senior management (e.g. Head of Adoption, Head of Children's Services, CEO etc.)	3
Manager/Management - unspecified	2
Business/project management role	2
Human Resources	2
Research and development role	1
Social work assistant	1
Fundraising role	1
Other	1

Social Workers and Support Service workers reported a mean average number of 10.65 years working in adoption, suggesting there is a large pool of experience to be drawn on from

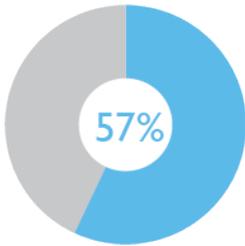
within the sector. For admin staff this figure drops to 5.11 years, which is perhaps unsurprising given the more flexible, and sometimes transient, nature of such roles.

Staff in VAA's unsurprisingly spend the vast majority of their time on matters relating directly to adoption. Across the entire workforce the mean average figure for time spent on matter directly relating to adoption was 86%, although amongst Social Workers, the figure rises to 95%. Only 11% reported that adoption took up less than half of their time.

Flexible working seems to be very common, with 94% saying their employer offers some form of flexible working.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

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57% of the workforce is aged between 45 and 64.



88% of the workforce believe different lifestyle choices are accepted and supported

The VAA sector is overwhelmingly female, white British, and more than half of employees are aged 45 or over.

85% of the total workforce is female, with 4% preferring not to state a sex, perhaps reflecting a desire for anonymity and a concern that they may be identifiable if working within a small team or organisation. 36% of the workforce is aged between 25 and 44, whereas 57% is aged 45-64. The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) estimates that 27% of the UK that the VAA sector has an older than average workforce, and this is recognised throughout the sector.

Such a demographic, whilst perhaps unsurprising for those with experience of the sector, does pose some challenges, most notably in terms of leadership and succession, which will be explored more fully in the coming chapters.

85% described their ethnicity as 'White British'. Whilst this figure is not particularly striking in comparison to national demographics, or indeed to the ethnicity of children adopted, or available for adoption, in certain areas it could pose some future challenges for a sector which promotes itself as best placed to find permanent homes for 'hard to place' children; including those from a BAME background.

Those agencies working in larger cities may find there is an increasing disconnect between staff, potential adopters and children, which could pose issues around cultural understanding and tapping in to new communities of potential adopters. Building up bridges with potential new communities requires significant investment by any VAA, and local knowledge and understanding can only be a benefit here. Further along the line, provision of materials in suitable languages, or interpreters, could also be helped by a diverse workforce.

However, that is not to suggest that the current VAA workforce is not delivering a high standard of service across the board, for all hard to place children. It is rather a suggestion of potential future needs and challenges, in order to ensure the sector continues to provide the quality expected to all.

## SPECIALIST SKILLS: DEALING WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

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In this climate of fewer children available for placement, VAAs are rising to challenge of finding placements for children with complex needs. These children include those with significant disability, complex psychological needs, older children or siblings groups - all of which come with additional responsibility and complications for a prospective parents. In practice, this means that VAAs are working very hard to target and recruit potential adopters who may be able to take on such children – regularly placing children where local authorities

may struggle. The skill and degree of support needed to find and support these prospective adopters should not be underestimated.

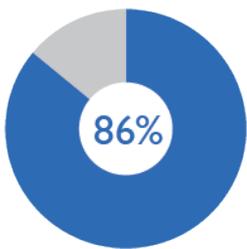
VAA's are also leading the way in opening the door to more 'unconventional' family types to adopt including LGBT couples, single individuals and couples with children.

There is great value in a sector which seeks to undertake the challenges of recruiting new adopters, successfully finding families for 'hard to place' children and supporting new parents and children throughout and beyond placement- all the while ensuring the organisation remains financially viable.

Our discussions suggested that parents choose to adopt through VAA's as they received a unique level of personalised service, that simply was not on offer through LA's. VAA's are in a position to offer a higher level of support throughout the process, and especially once the adoption placement begins. VAA's are particularly appreciated for their ability to offer high quality pre, and post, adoption support. Indeed, many are commissioned by LA's to provide post adoption support to adoptive parents and children placed by LA adoption staff.

We also found that staff in VAA's are often particularly proud of their ability to offer excellent post adoption support services, with many mentioning this as a unique offering. Expanding upon these skills and strengthening this offer was also something perceived to be very important to employees.

## HIGH LEVELS OF EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

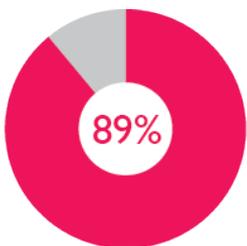


86% of the sector enjoy going to work on a day-to-day basis

One of the most striking findings from this research has been the levels of satisfaction within the VAA workforce. There are particularly high levels of satisfaction, not just with individual roles, but with the sector in its entirety. Employees are motivated by their job, and by the VAA sector; a very positive image for the future of the sector.

86% of those surveyed said they enjoy going to work on a day-to-day basis, a figure which increases to 93% amongst those in senior management roles. Just 3% of those surveyed disagreed, with the remaining staff ambivalent. 54% of NHS employees said they enjoy going to work on a daily basis, when asked a comparable question, and 63% of social workers said they were happy in their work when asked by the Guardian Jobs Survey, in association with Cafcass.<sup>7</sup>

Satisfaction is high when it comes to individual agencies too; 72% agreed that they felt valued by their employer and 76% agreed that everyone in their organisation is working towards the same goal.



89% agreed their job has a positive impact on society

What is more, VAA employees believe that their industry has a great deal to offer, and is changing things for the better. When asked, 89% agreed that their job has a positive impact on society, an incredibly high figure demonstrating the passion and belief of those employed across the sector. 78% said they would recommend the VAA sector as a good sector to work in.

Qualitatively, we found throughout the research that employees were overwhelmingly positive about their agencies and their sector. The sense that their work created lifelong, stable families for children who would otherwise have remained in care was a strong motivator, and gave the workforce a real sense of purpose and reward. Furthermore, employees talked of the

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nhsstaffsurveys.com/Page/1006/Latest-Results/2014-Results/>

satisfaction they also gained from seeing parents who had thought themselves unable to have a family welcoming a child or children into their lives. Employees were dedicated to supporting both children and parents throughout the process, and believed their agency offered the best service.

A certain degree of this positivity would appear to stem from the negativity associated with working for LA's. Many who had come to the sector from an LA background described the change in working styles and staff morale as having a big impact on their satisfaction with the VAA sector.

**“I can't believe how much more pleasant it is to work here, than in my previous role [at an LA]. People here actually want to come to work, and that makes them better workers and nicer colleagues.”**

**“It's a bit of everything really, that makes it better. The office is nicer, the management isn't shut away behind locked doors. There is a pressure to achieve, but it's because we want to get the best for the kids, not just reach some random target set by someone who has no idea what they're talking about.”**

Of particular note seemed to be the perceived difference in leadership styles between VAA's and LA's – a point regularly articulated by those who had worked in both types of organisation. For example, some referenced the difficulties in engaging management in LA's, and a feeling of being 'abandoned'. However this could be contrasted with a strong feeling of inclusion within VAA's, and a sense that everyone in the agency is 'in it together'. Staff spoke of the willingness on the part of senior managers to hear and trial their ideas, and to help them develop and grow within their own careers.

**“This is a supportive place to work. Our staff are friendly and engaging. Everybody knows everybody. The culture is very different to a local authority. We have staff that have worked here for a long time.” VAA - CEO**

58% of those surveyed reported that they felt comfortable enough to challenge the status quo, a remarkably positive figure that clearly plays out more qualitative findings around feeling 'in it together'. 70% agreed that their ideas and opinions are encouraged and valued within their organisation, with 20% giving a neutral response and only 11% disagreeing, a clear indication of the positive work environment created by VAA's, and appreciated by staff.

Employees were also driven and motivated by their overarching belief in the power of adoption to achieve better outcomes for children. VAA staff felt that their work could make a real difference in the lives of children, and this was valued by some above more practical matters such as pay or benefits.

**“It's quite simple in my mind: adoption is the best solution for kids. Not care, not jumping around between different foster families, but a stable, long-term home with someone who wants to be the parent.” VAA - CEO**

**“This is not the best paid job in the world, by some way! But what makes it worthwhile is the fact that we get to take kids out of incredibly difficult and damaging situations and put them with people who will love and care for them.”**

Some felt that adoption in its current form was under threat, and were very protective of it. There was a sense that adoption was under attack from numerous sides, with the media cherry-picking negative stories and using damaging language around 'forced adoptions' and the judiciary leaning towards special guardianship placements. Some even perceived pressure on

the 'British' model of adoption, worrying that in the future a more European attitude to adoption may be encouraged, or even forced upon them. Staff were protective of a system they see as protecting the rights of the child above all, something which they believe offers the best security and care. There was some concern over a more European approach which might place more emphasis on the rights of the birth parent, and make the vital work that VAA's do more difficult.

## SKILLS & CAREER DEVELOPMENT

There are a wide range of different skills across the VAA sector, as well as approaches to training and development.

While social workers are necessarily qualified, 52% of support service workers also have at least one professional qualification.

Across the board, 15% had a management qualifications, although this figure rises to 60% amongst senior management and 30% amongst middle management. It is perhaps worth noting that there is a requirement that those leading adoption agencies have at least NVQLevel 5 Diploma in Leadership for Health and Social Care and Children and Young People's Services, and this may account somewhat the high number of management qualifications amongst senior manager.

The only other professional qualifications held by more than 5% were counselling at 13% and psychological therapy techniques at 9% and psychology at 6%.

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS HELD (ONLY THOSE HELD BY OVER 5% SHOWN)	%
Social Work	61
Management (MBA, NVQ, City & Guilds etc)	15
Counselling	13
Psychological therapy techniques for use with children, adolescents and families	9
Psychology	6
Degree/Masters/Ph.D. (not in Social Work)	6
Training/teaching	6

VAA staff are likely to be experienced, with the average number of years working in adoption at 9.61. They are also loyal, with the average number of years spent at current agency 5.1, and with only 17% thinking that it is likely they will leave their current employer in the next three years. This suggests there is a lot for the sector to build on in terms of skills, experience and also loyalty and consistency of service provision which is a major benefit when it comes to supporting adoptive parents. There is perhaps merit in the sector, and also individual agencies further promoting this numbers.

### 9.61 years

VAA staff have an average of 9.61 years working in adoption

### Training & Development

56% of those surveyed agreed that they would like to develop beyond their current role in the next 3 years, with particular interest from those in middle management and non-mangerial roles. Perhaps unsurprisingly interest in development declined markedly with age. There is therefore both encouraging and challenging news for the sector in terms of development, with the older workforce perhaps representing a challenge for the sector alongside a clear desire to progress amongst lower levels appearing more encouraging.

There is some work to be done when it comes to training, with 63% describing themselves as satisfied with the quality of training received. It is worth noting that this figure is pulled down by the proportion of Admin workers who are slightly less satisfied overall (55% satisfied with quality of training).

There is also a hunger for more training and development amongst employees. 59% were satisfied with the amount of training they receive currently, leaving some room for improvement, as around two in five (40%) were either dissatisfied or neutral about the amount of training. It seems that employees across the sector see having a wide range of skills as beneficial to their work, and this could go some way to explaining the slightly lower satisfaction figure for amount of training received. As part of our employee survey, we presented 20 different topics on which skills could be developed, and 16 were thought to be “a major help” by half or more of respondents. The highest rating for skills fell to ‘therapeutic training’ and ‘training and developing others’, both of which were thought to be a major help by three quarters of employees.

**“We need therapy skills, as the children who are coming through are older and more likely to have therapy needs.”**

When asked what might help them to do their job well, we found, unsurprisingly, virtual unanimity of agreement with the statements ‘learning from others with experience’ and ‘gaining experience yourself’. 90% thought internal training would be helpful, and 95% agreed external training would help them to do their job well. Social work and support service staff were the most positive, but the trend was present across all groups of employees.

Interestingly, there was a strong sense amongst staff that increased collaboration across the VAA sector, and across the adoption sector as a whole, would be beneficial. 89% agreed with both statements (increased collaboration across the VAA sector and across the adoption sector as a whole), with social workers and support service workers again amongst the most positive.

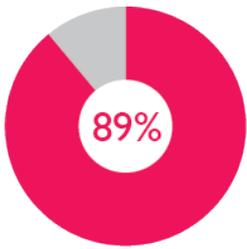
**“There needs to be more support and dialogue between agencies, especially on a regional basis.”**

Qualitatively, such sentiments were echoed by social workers interviewed and also by senior management, who were more focussed on the quality and efficacy of training delivered.

**“Everybody always wants to do training, but from a business perspective we have had to make sure that the benefits are clear and that they are also communicated to others in the organisation.” – VAA CEO**

**“I would like to do some more training. I would especially like to undertake some theraplay training.”**

There is clearly great potential for further developing an already skilled and passionate workforce, whilst taking into consideration budgets and time constraints. The appetite for learning from others and internal training shown by the workforce indicates that training does not always need to be external, costly and time consuming, but that there is rather a role for making the most of experience and resources already available to each agency. There is also perhaps a role for more collaboration between VAA’s when it comes to training, given the enthusiasm for it within the workforce.

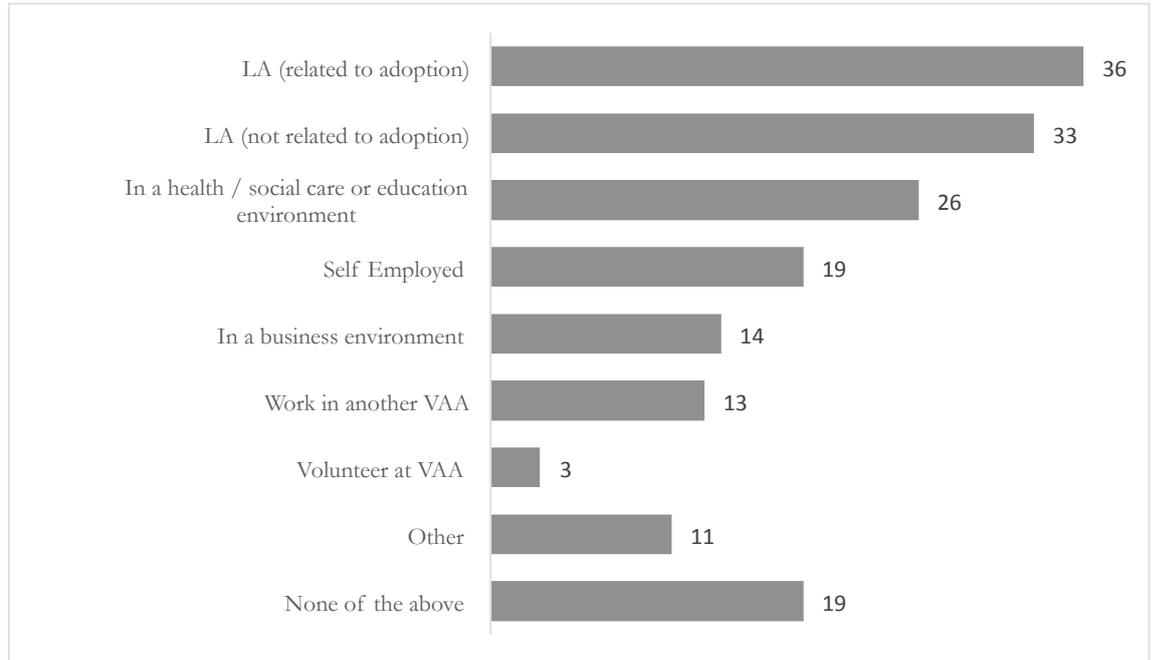


89% of VAA employees believe increased collaboration between VAAs would be beneficial

## ROUTES INTO THE SECTOR

VAA staff are likely to have had some form of experience in their career outside VAA sector, creating a diverse and experienced workforce. There is, however, one dominant theme when it comes to previous VAA staff experience: that of the Local Authority (LA). 36% reported that they had previously worked in adoption for an LA, and a further 33% reported that they had previously worked for an LA not in relation to adoption services. 26% had experience of working in a health and social care environment not relating to adoption.

## Professional experience gained in the last 10 years:



Survey, Question 15, Base: 605

Such findings were supported by our qualitative research, with many of those we spoke to having come to the sector from an LA background.

**“A lot of people come here from LA’s. I think people almost feel you cut your teeth in the LA, and then you get to come here when you’ve got a bit more experience.”**

**“I think there’s a lot to be said for recruiting people with experience of the LA side of things. We rarely take on newly qualified social workers as the training and development burden can be too great.” – VAA CEO**

**“If you’ve seen the other side of things, that is the Child Protection side of things, you have a much deeper understanding of the kids and where they have come from.”**

There may be many reasons why VAAs attract, and in many cases deliberately recruit, those with experience.

- VAAs offer a more specialist service, often working with ‘hard to place’ children
- Smaller VAA’s may not have the wider team to help develop more junior members of staff
- There is a dominant narrative around Child Protection experience providing essential, or at least desired, experience when it comes to VAA work
- VAA work is less guaranteed, and so experienced staff are an asset when it comes to encouraging LA’s and prospective adopters to work with agencies
- The smaller size of some agencies makes it more difficult to take risks when it comes to hiring and training, potentially contributing to a more conservative mindset

That is not to say the value of younger, more inexperienced staff is not valued or recognised by the sector. Some agencies were particularly interested in the new ideas brought into their organisations by newly qualified social workers, as well as a less jaded approach to the sector than those with extensive experience of working in an LA environment.

**“You do have to invest time and money in newly qualified social workers, but that said, you can sometimes wait a long time for ex-LA staff to adapt to the pace and standards here too.” – VAA CEO**

**“NQSWS are a great advantage. There are lots of people who are very experienced but very set in their ways. We can shape practice if they are recruited young. A NQSW will need back up, but they have lots of new ideas and dynamism.” – VAA CEO**

The Assisted Year of Employment (ASYE) was mentioned by many as an example of ways to get newly qualified employees alongside the support necessary for their development. Whilst some teething problems were reported with the scheme in its first year, most of those with experience of the scheme thought any issues had since been ironed out, and could see the benefit of continued use of the ASYE programme to their organisation.

**“We’ve just finished our first ASYE programme. It was a great success. At first the system for development was a little clunky, as there were lots of different standards to measure against. We were a little nervous at first about the level of commitment required but things now seem to be working out okay.” – VAA CEO**

This said, amongst the most difficult to recruit roles were experienced Social Workers, and also those who were interested in management roles. 11 of the 22 agencies who responded to the HR survey told us that recruiting ‘Experienced Social Workers’ was either ‘Fairly’ or ‘Very’ Difficult to recruit. 12 of the 22 told us that recruiting ‘Experienced Social Workers who are interested in senior management’ was either ‘Fairly’ or ‘Very’ difficult.

## **Challenges**

We also discussed challenges to recruitment as part of our qualitative and quantitative work on this project. Some of the most common concerns we encountered were around salary ranges and pension provision for staff coming from an LA background. For example, there was some sense that individuals who had come from local authorities were less cooperative and more bound by the prescribed job role and a need for clear boundaries and ‘rules’. Some felt that this attitude could cause some problems in what are essentially small businesses where people are required to be more adaptable and creative.

Comparison with local authorities could also cause some practical challenges regarding pay and benefits. For example, some VAA’s were unable to match LA pension provisions, and it was felt that in a general sense pay scales were slightly lower than those found in LA’s. It was notable that job satisfaction and intention to remain within the current organisation were higher in agencies that matched LA payscales.

## Summary

The sector is, however, less diverse when it comes to the workforce, which is overwhelmingly white and female, with a high proportion of employees aged 45. Whilst we see no current issues with the demographic structure of the workforce, and indeed it is consistently delivering a high quality service to customers, there may be challenges that lie ahead for the sector in terms of leadership and succession, as well as creating a workforce which more closely reflects the specialist offering of the VAA sector.

VAA's have a lot to offer potential adopters with the range of specialist services they are able to provide. The VAA workforce is highly skilled and agencies are set up to deliver a more specialised service than Local Authorities (LA's). This includes the ability of VAA's to find families for harder to place children, who might not have otherwise been placed.

That the VAA sector itself is so diverse is also a fantastic selling point for prospective adopters, who can find in the range of offerings one which best suits their needs. The VAA sector offers specialisms, traditional faith based values, local or national reach; a much wider pool to select from than an LA.

There is much to be positive about in terms of employee satisfaction and morale within the sector, and VAA's have a lot to shout about in terms of attracting new staff. The sector is staffed by motivated and passionate individuals, who have a great belief in the power of their work to do good.

In addition to attracting new staff, the VAA sector can and must use the positivity of its workforce to position itself as the best choice for both LA's looking to place children and prospective parents to adopt. Agencies have a lot to offer in terms of engagement and morale, and this should be used to bolster the reputation of the sector.

Staff are experienced and specialist, and receive a good amount of high quality training. However, more can be done to expand the skills base of employees where possible, as there is a great deal of enthusiasm for broadening skills sets.

Traditional pathways into the VAA sector remain dominant, and there is not a great deal of appetite for change here, primarily due to the specialised nature of the services provided by VAA's and the value placed on Child Protection experience. That said, the ASYE programme has been well-received by many, particularly due to the training and development provision and structure of the programme.

VAA's have a strong case for attracting LA staff, even without the pay and pension packages, due to their workplace culture and accessibility of management. Looking to the future, it may be that as VAA's provide more specialised services, and indeed support services, more diverse backgrounds will become more common.

# Effective management

## LEADERSHIP

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Unsurprisingly, leadership styles varied greatly by agency, and by leader. What we did find all agencies had in common, to a greater or lesser extent, was concern about the future leadership and senior management of VAA's. In particular, smaller and medium sized agencies tended to have more worries and concerns over succession, perhaps reflecting the potentially much smaller pool of internal applicants for potential roles. Larger agencies had increasing resources dedicated to strategy, although this is unsurprising given the different nature of running a larger business. Whilst these agencies have more structures and resources in place to deal with succession, they are perhaps less flexible and adaptable to the changing pace and shape of the sector in the future.

Qualitatively, we encountered some worries across the sector around CEO succession, due to a perceived lack of suitable candidates and a group of CEO's who will be looking to retire in the next 10 years or so. Quantitatively, we found that 41% of senior managers thought there would be good opportunities to develop their career with their current employer in next three years, and 29% thought there would be good opportunities in the VAA sector in the next three years. Given that the majority of those looking to apply for chief executive posts may well be drawn from this pool, there is perhaps some encouraging news in such figures.

In terms of the wider employee pool, 10% suggested they will be looking to retire in the next 3 years, although this figure rose to 19% amongst senior management.

### Internal progression

There was some sense across the sector that VAA's can struggle to encourage staff to progress up the leadership ladder, due to a variety of factors. We encountered a range of views amongst both existing management and social workers, as to why succession may not be a particularly attractive option for VAA social workers, including:

Often management responsibilities mean social workers have less direct involvement with the children and prospective adopters, and this may be off-putting to those who joined the profession to work with children and families. It may also reduce, or be perceived to reduce, the 'feel good factor' of placing children with families

There is a prevailing sense that a social work background is necessary to work in VAA management, which can be off-putting to some with a more diverse range of experiences or a different background

Negativity around management and management structures in LA's can mean staff in VAA's arrive with preconceived ideas and negativity, which dissuade them from considering management roles

**“I didn't become a social worker just to sit in an office and never meet any children or families.”**

**“I think there is still a really strong sense that if you want to be involved in senior management at a VAA, then you have to have been a social worker, in**

**adoption. This is massively reducing our pool of potential candidates for leadership positions.”**



56% would like to develop beyond their current role within 3 years but only 38% through there would be good opportunities to do so

However, we found that 56% of those surveyed would like to develop beyond their current role in the next 3 years, but only 38% thought there will be good opportunities with their current employer to do so. Such a figure suggests there is work to do for VAA's in terms of enabling staff with ambitions to progress up the career ladder.

Indeed, of those who suggested they were interested in developing their career, 50% would prioritise specialist skills, such as therapeutic training, whereas 44% and 38% respectively would prioritise management and leadership skills. Such numbers are encouraging; the Guardian Jobs Survey, in association with Cafcass, found that 31%<sup>8</sup> of social workers wanted to become a manager. There is clearly a desire amongst VAA staff for progression, and the sector has some work to do in convincing ambitious staff to stay put and progress through the ranks.

There appears to be a disconnect between the perceived lack of ambition amongst some staff and the career development aspirations of others. The sense that it is difficult to recruit or promote social workers to management roles within VAA's may in fact be creating a sense amongst some employees that there is little opportunity for them to progress.

As we have discussed throughout this report, there are many varying organisational approaches amongst VAA's, and this is also true when it comes to measuring quality and productivity.

Larger agencies are likely to have systems in place to measure quality and productivity, however we found that smaller agencies can be just as effective at delivering a high quality service without the same structures in place.

For some newer agencies, structures were constantly in flux as agencies adapted to new ways of working. Such flexibility was a key strength of newer agencies, allowing them to adapt to their workforce and the changing landscape of the VAA and adoption sectors.

It is likely that as agencies grow and become more established, for those only recently set up, processes will become more formalised.

## **Employee Progress**

Across the board, systems dealing with employee progress seem to be working well. 77% of those surveyed agreed that their progress is formally reviewed and they have a clear outline of what is expected of them, and only 5% disagreed that their performance was judged fairly. Agreement with this statement rose to 92% amongst senior management, suggesting the majority of those in leadership positions are feeling positive about their agencies. 79% of staff surveyed agreed that their performance is judged fairly, a reassuringly high figure.

Such findings were also supported by qualitative data. Senior management teams often spoke of the employee review system in their own agencies as a strength, often not just of their individual agency but also the VAA sector as a whole. Progress was seen to be reviewed regularly, and by senior management, including the CEO, rather than line managers.

**“I think it's a great strength of ours, and of other VAA's, that the CEO is directly involved in reviewing progress and setting objectives. It means**

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<sup>8</sup> "Social Lives Survey, 2014"

**employees seen that senior management are involved, and interested, and it builds up trust between us.”**

Furthermore, staff agreed that progress reviews were undertaken regularly and provided a solid framework for progression.

**“It’s much better here than it was at my previous job [at an LA]. Not only is progress much more up for discussion, but the small size and accessibility of the CEO and others means it doesn’t have to be restricted to one session every 6 months or so, but it’s more ongoing.”**

## **Bureaucracy**

Whilst systems around employee progress and review are working effectively, there appears to be room for improvement when it comes to bureaucracy and workload. Staff were less positive about systems in place being beneficial to their individual workload and objectives. Just over half (53%) agreed that the systems in place helped them to do their job efficiently, whilst only 40% agreed that processes and systems are streamlined to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. Amongst social workers this figure drops to 35%.

**“We have introduced a new scorecard- managers fill this in and points are assigned to certain tasks. From this we can work out who is overworked and who isn’t.” – VAA CEO**

53% of employees felt that they had more work to do than they can get through in the hours they are paid for, suggesting a busy workforce. However previously reported high levels of satisfaction would seem to demonstrate that this feeling is not adversely affecting how satisfied employees are with their jobs.

When it came to discussing the more practical aspects of their work, 70% agreed they had adequate materials, supplies and equipment to do their job properly.

Finally, 65% agreed that their organisation has appropriate processes in place to ensure that lessons are learnt to avoid the same mistakes happening again; an encouraging indicator perhaps of future progress when it comes to processes and bureaucracy.

### Summary

There is great potential for the VAA sector to develop over the course of the next few years, and a great appetite amongst employees for it to do so. Staff retention and development and training as seen as key to this progression and growth. Employees are very satisfied with progress and development reviews and feel they are given adequate support and fair judgement when it comes to their career development. Whilst there may be some room for improvement here, there is also much to be positive about for the sector.

That said, there are clearly some fears and concerns amongst the workforce, the majority of which are outside the sector's direct control. However, planning and successful use of grants and the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) could help to bolster and shore up the VAA business model for the immediate future.

In addition, management and leadership training will be key to ensuring the long term viability of individual agencies and clear succession planning. This will be particularly important for smaller agencies as they look to the future.

Not all employees are convinced that the structures in place around quality and streamlining work well for them. There is, however, positivity around learning from past mistakes and from other VAA's.

Whilst there is a sense that encouraging social workers to progress to management positions is difficult, we did find ambition amongst staff to progress their careers. There are clearly some issues to be addressed around the ability to make a difference to the lives of children, which in many ways increases through a management position even though influence may be indirect, and experience required to take on the roles.

VAA's need to make sure there is adequate investment in internal training in order to develop and encourage the next generation of leaders and senior management, and to avoid losing middle management to other agencies or sectors due to a perceived lack of career progression opportunities.

VAA's are seen to be fantastic at re-engaging formerly jaded or cynical ex-LA employees, and reinvigorating their desire to work in adoption, and have a belief in their work. They are also skilled at ensuring all staff are motivated, thereby unlocking enthusiasm and motivation that may have been somewhat underappreciated or utilised elsewhere. This is a fantastic asset when it comes to attracting talent, staff development, and also retention.

# Perceptions of the ‘future’

When it comes to looking to the future of VAAs, staff were mostly positive. This was particularly felt in relation to individual agencies, with 71% agreeing their organisation has strong vision and leadership for the future. Amongst this, small and medium-sized agencies were slightly less positive than large agencies, perhaps indicating a less sophisticated approach to internal communications amongst smaller agencies who may not feel such exercises are a priority.

In terms of fears and concerns for the future, the focus was on funding. 84% agreed that stability of funding was a worry for them, alongside 84% agreeing that funding pressures on LA's were a concern.

**“The interagency fee has remained stagnant for 4 years now. It’s impossible to keep pace, if the LA income doesn’t go up year on year.”**

**“We can’t continue on the interagency fee model if all the children are ‘hard to place’. These children require extra time and money.” - VAA CEO**

We also encountered fears around the future of the British ‘model’ of adoption, with 73% saying they are concerned about potential policy and legal changes affecting adoption in the UK. Further reflecting worries and fears around the continuity of adoption services, 58% said they were worried about the privatisation of adoption service.

**“I do worry, with the things you see in the media and them now using ‘forced adoption’ so frequently and negatively now. I wonder how long before we have to start using a more European approach.”**

**“I don’t necessarily think it’s positive for the sector to start becoming more and more privatised. That’s not what we’re about.” – VAA CEO**

The past year or so has seen great change in the sector due to the emergence of different business models, encouraged by the government capacity expansion grants. The influence of these emergent models remains to be seen, but the current diversity of the VAA offer may indicate some future direction. That is not to say that traditional business models are not viable or valued, rather that the sector does appear to be changing and adapting to new contexts.

**“Our culture is enterprising. We have the capacity to change - we are dynamic, we are prepared to evolve and change and we want people to effect change.”**

## Areas to focus on

Employees were asked to select the top three areas they thought their agency should focus on in the coming year, and business growth was the top selected option, with 58%. Staff are clearly ambitious for their agencies, and for the sector as a whole.

Staff morale and retention was second, with 46%, closely followed by staff development and training on 45%.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The VAA sector has a workforce to be proud of and could perhaps be more vocal about their strengths, passion, experience and loyalty

A challenging and fast changing environment is driving innovation and collaboration and the sector and workforce is generally positive about change and development.

An experienced workforce presents significant challenges in terms of leadership succession planning, however it's worth noting that VAAs are skilled at realising untapped potential in children, prospective adopters and employees. A number of leaders interviewed had successfully risen to the challenge of leadership through necessity

The diversity of the sector is a significant strength in delivering quality to the widest possible audience of adopters and ultimately children in need of a family.

Thank you

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