

Strategic Plan 2020 to 2023

Adopted by the CVAA Board

20th January 2020



Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies

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I. Introduction from the Chair

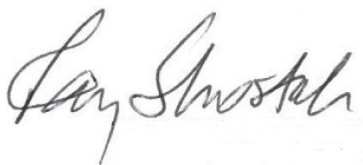
This strategy sets out what CVAA will do to support its members over the next three years in their vital work, making a difference to the lives of children and families. It is built upon a robust review of what we have achieved to date and intelligence gathered from members about their priorities and aspirations for the future. We have listened to the views of members across the UK who have told us that influencing the policy debate and campaigning for improvements in the adoption system is a core requirement for CVAA at a time when neither policy nor resources are keeping pace with the needs of children and families. We have heard that, although our sector has many dedicated and skilled people, they would welcome support to develop their knowledge and networks to remain at the leading edge of good practice. CVAA must also play a greater role in increasing the visibility of VAAs and the unique nature of the excellent services they provide, to secure and extend their reach.

Our bold ambitions reflect the challenges Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) face in a time of volatility and change, enabling us to focus our energies on what really matters to children, families and VAAs in an unpredictable external environment.

We hope it will be a shared strategy, encouraging and supporting greater collaboration across the sector and with supportive partners. It will require shared ownership and collective action to change policy and public understanding and a willingness to learn together, building on the impressive history VAAs have of leading-edge practice, placing children at the heart of all we do.

CVAA and its members share a common cause of improving the lives of all those affected by adoption. Over the next three years we can deliver changes which ensure that voluntary adoption services receive the funding, recognition and support they need to deliver for children.

Together we can make a difference.



Ray Shostak

Chair of Trustees

2. CVAA and its members

Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs)

CVAA represents 29 of the 33 VAAs registered in the UK. VAAs have a centuries-long, proud history of finding loving homes for children and being at the forefront of developing effective adoption support for children and families. VAAs vary in size with the biggest making around 115 placements per year and the smallest averaging 10. All have strong links with their local communities and focus on family finding for children with the most complex needs and backgrounds.

VAAs work across regional and national boundaries to provide 24% of adoptive placements across the UK, and significant numbers for priority children; those over 5 years old, in a sibling group, with a disability or BAME heritage. They are unique in making a lifelong commitment to the families they support, working alongside them to ensure their children thrive and they receive the right support at the right time through to adulthood and beyond. Currently 95% of VAAs receive the top two quality scores from their inspectorates and remain at the leading edge of adoption practice. There is much to be proud of and build upon to meet the challenges of adoption for future generations.

CVAA

CVAA was formed by members in 1993, creating a structure for joint endeavour to enable a coordinated approach to placement pricing, developing best practice and working together in improving the lives of children and families. The membership has been at its most powerful and effective when agencies have worked together; setting the interagency fee, lobbying for adoption support resources and increasing the recruitment of adopters across the UK

CVAA is steered by a Board of Trustees, elected annually from the membership with an independent chair and set of sub-committees providing more detailed oversight for key priorities. The Board is committed to ensuring that CVAA stays true to its charitable objectives, which are:

- *To maximise the contribution of voluntary adoption agencies by influencing the policy and practice of adoption in the UK at national regional and local levels.*
- *To directly increase the number of children successfully placed for adoption by promoting liaison and collaborative partnership working practices between voluntary adoption agencies and all other stakeholders.*
- *To develop standards of excellence in all matters relating to adoption good practice and management throughout the voluntary sector.*

(Memorandum of Association 2005)

3. Core Services

CVAA delivers a set of core services which form the basis of our support to members.

- **Advocacy and influencing:** CVAA has a strong history of punching above its weight in policy influence, engaging ministers and other decision-makers to effect change. We keep adoption high on the national policy agenda; playing an active part in national decision-making forums, meeting regularly with ministers and senior officials, and focusing our lobbying and campaign work to secure a better deal for children and the VAAs supporting them.
- **Data, information and policy support to members:** We know that members value the quarterly sector data returns, information on the payment of the IAF, regular newsletters, and policy and practice updates that CVAA provides to keep them up to speed with changes affecting adoption and children's services.
- **Networking and collaboration:** Members appreciate the opportunities CVAA provides for them to meet, network and share ideas. Members have told us these events are even more important in a time of uncertainty and change, as are opportunities to build collaboration with statutory colleagues and the wider children's sector.
- **Practice and business development:** Practice development has been at the heart of CVAA since its inception and has expanded considerably in recent years to meet member demand. VAAs are committed to delivering the highest quality services which keep pace with research evidence and the changing needs and aspirations of children and families. CVAA will continue to prioritise and extend support for VAAs to remain at the leading edge of practice and business development.

This Strategy builds upon CVAA's previous successes in achieving positive policy change, securing resources for member development, setting the interagency fee, and consistently providing high-quality core support services for members. It will contribute to CVAA's sustainability through maintaining excellent value for our core membership and growing our subscriber base. The Strategy provides a structure within which CVAA can deliver its charitable objects, focussing our resources and energies on the activities which will best serve VAAs and the children they support, in ways that recognise and respond to the current challenges facing the adoption system. The Strategy prioritises:

- **Strong, consistent advocacy:** Keeping VAAs at the heart of children's social care, representing their interests with all four *UK* governments, in national forums and with policy makers to ensure VAA perspectives and experience influence change at all levels. This work is of increasing importance in the current political environment, where instability in government at both ministerial and departmental level mean we must work hard to keep adoption high on the agenda of new administrations, meeting regularly with ministers and senior officials to highlight the role of VAAs and influence government thinking on the future of adoption. CVAA will continue to represent the sector on the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board for England, with the National Adoption Service in Wales, Stormont and the Scottish Government. CVAA will work with members to ensure the VAA voice is heard by Government Departments and other

national policy groups, pressing home the value of adopter choice and the vital role VAAs play in finding families for the most complex children.

- **The Interagency Fee:** Working with ADCS, Regional Adoption Agencies, the National Adoption Service in Wales and the devolved governments to re-establish the level playing field and achieve greater consistency across the UK. The new IAF with regular inflationary uplifts is now established, but consecutive decision-making persists. CVAA aims to achieve a consensus position on fee payments, disruptions, sibling groups and costs for families, to ease the bureaucratic burden on all involved and achieve speedier placements for VAA families. Timely payment of the fee is a priority and work will continue to seek a process by which the level playing field can be re-established in England as it has been in Scotland and Wales
- **Collaboration across the sector and with key stakeholders:** Closer collaboration can only strengthen the sector through the exchange of ideas, sharing of what works and collective activities or projects which save resources and move us forward together. CVAA will create new opportunities for productive joint work across the membership alongside building closer relationships with key stakeholders to build understanding of the value of VAAs and a more cooperative approach to meeting the needs of children and families. Building closer relationships with the family courts, local authorities, RAAs and Regional Collaboratives is essential to counter the damaging fragmentation of the adoption system which works against the interest of children and families.
- **Increasing the visibility of VAAs and their services:** In spite of many decades of successful operation, the work of VAAs is not well understood by the general public or professionals working across children's services. CVAA aims add weight and reach to the promotional activities undertaken by local agencies, reaching new audiences, supporting recruitment and increasing public understanding of the vital role VAAs play in finding forever homes for children across the UK.

4. Vision, Mission and Values

The Vision and Mission below reflect the congruence between CVAA's purpose and that of our members. CVAA's role is to represent, support, promote and advocate for VAAs, facilitating collective action to progress their life-changing work with children for whom adoption is the best plan and their families. We share a passionate belief in the unique power of adoption to provide the love and stability children who cannot live with their birth families deserve.

Our Vision

For adopted children, young people and adults to lead happy fulfilling lives in loving families supported by a strong voluntary adoption sector.

CVAA's role in achieving this vision is to champion and support VAAs in their life-changing work. We are wholly committed to adopter choice and the vital contribution of a thriving VAA sector, able to provide the best possible support for birth and adoptive families in their lifelong adoption journeys. Our mission reflects that purpose:

Our Mission

To achieve excellence in the adoption system through harnessing the collective expertise, commitment and innovation of the voluntary adoption sector, working together for children, families and adopted adults.

VAAs put children first, always. In our lobbying and advocacy, CVAA upholds that central principle and works to amplify the voice and influence of VAAs using their collective wisdom and the integrity of their work to achieve positive change for children. The unique impact VAAs have lies not only in what they do, but also in **how** they undertake their work. The values which underpin this strategy mirror those ways of working, aiming to inspire sector-wide recognition and ownership, laying the foundations of how CVAA and its members can work together to achieve our aspirations for children and our sector.

Our Values

Children and families are at the heart of everything we do: We listen to children, birth and adoptive families and shape our work through their experiences and aspirations.

We are stronger together: We believe in the power of collective action and the value of a thriving VAA sector, supporting each other to deliver the best for children and families

Evidence and Insight: We will build on the evidence of what works, sharing best practice, using research and data insights to support service and sector development

Ambitious for improvement: We are determined, creative and unafraid to challenge the status quo to change the world for adopted children and families.

Collaboration and partnership: We will work constructively with others across all sectors of society who share our vision and values to achieve positive change for children and families.

The involvement of children, young people and families and respect for their experiences is at the core of professional practice across the sector. This strategy seeks to build on this important aspect of each VAA's work to create collective sector-wide opportunities for us to learn and develop together as a result of the lived experiences of those we exist to support. Building co-production opportunities, finding new ways to hear the views of children and adopted adults, using these experiences as a touchstone for quality will ensure VAA services are fit for future generations and able to respond flexibly to the changing needs of children, adopted adults, their adoptive families and birth families.

5. Strategic Ambitions

The pages which follow set out CVAA's Strategic Ambitions and Goals, which are designed to support members in putting children first and growing visibility, reach, skills and service quality. The Ambitions reflect the unique contribution CVAA can make as the sector's membership body and are designed to be delivered in partnership with members, and others in the wider children's social care sector, who share our values and aspirations to build a better future for children. We aim to strengthen the VAA family, building trust and collaboration across the membership, combining their individual expertise in new ways to enhance sustainability, build skills and extend the reach of VAA services.

Ambition 1: A Sustainable Sector:

Supporting and promoting a strong, sustainable voluntary adoption sector able to meet the future needs of children and families

The Challenge: There are serious challenges to the long-term sustainability of the VAA sector. VAAs now have fewer statutory clients for their services and have been required to develop new relationships in an unstable and emerging new landscape for adoption. Policy and funding are not keeping pace with the needs of children and families. The sufficiency gap persists, and recruitment is a challenge across the UK. There is widespread public ignorance about who can adopt, where assessments and approvals can take place, and the positive outcomes achieved for children.

Our Goals

- ❖ To increase visibility of VAA services with the public to promote adopter choice and support recruitment
- ❖ To promote the unique nature of VAA adoption, working with members to deliver strong consistent messages, developing innovative partnerships to access new audiences
- ❖ To minimise delays for children through re-establishing the level playing field on the IAF in England and achieving consistency in its application across the UK.
- ❖ To enhance the quality and range of adoption support through continuation and greater VAA access to the Adoption Support Fund, lobbying for a standard early help offer for all adopted families and improving support to adopted adults.

Ambition 2: System leadership:

Using the knowledge and expertise of the sector to provide thought leadership on the future of adoption and influence positive change

The Challenge: Policy affecting adoption is fragmented across national, regional and local systems. Quality of support is variable, systems are not child-focussed and budget considerations are driving poor decision-making. There is a need to develop a new vision for adoption, drawing on the strengths of all stakeholders and building a collaborative whole-family approach. Research is highlighting the need to rethink contact, lifelong identity and birth family support alongside increasing understanding of the lifelong impact of early trauma. VAAs are in a unique position to lead this work, but limited resources and a cash-based business model inhibit risk and prevent agencies from exploring unfunded new developments.

Our Goals

- ❖ To provide thought leadership, developing new ideas and challenging established thinking using experience and insights from VAA practice and the voices of our service users
- ❖ To influence the future of adoption through creating opportunities for collaboration and co-production across the adoption sector with the child at the centre.
- ❖ To increase understanding of what works in birth and adopter family support and lifelong identity, supporting VAAs to stay at the leading edge of practice.
- ❖ To increase collaboration with the judiciary and other vital partners, building understanding of the effectiveness of VAA adopter preparation and support and the positive outcomes for children.

Ambition 3 Innovation:

Curating and promoting innovation within voluntary adoption agencies and across the wider adoption sector

The Challenge: CVAA members have no shortage of ideas and ambition, but resources are stretched. Adopted children, young people and adults are largely excluded from the development of national policy and practice. VAAs have an impressive record of lifelong support for families and listening to their needs and aspirations, but this goes largely unrecognised by the wider adoption system. Harnessing this unique element of the VAA approach could mark members out in the eyes of potential adopters, increasing both recruitment and service quality. Innovative use of new technology has the capacity to enhance the reach and relevance of VAA services, but agencies lack the digital expertise and resources to capitalise on this.

Our Goals

- ❖ To promote the quality and effectiveness of VAA services through the engagement and endorsement of service users, promoting and supporting co-production, marking the sector out and enhancing adopter choice
- ❖ To support sector wide solutions for VAAs in the innovative use of new technologies for recruitment, adoption support and business efficiency
- ❖ To create a CVAA innovation programme, stimulating and supporting VAAs to achieve change for children

Ambition 4 Knowledge Hub:

Providing insight, data and research evidence to enable the sector to tackle current challenges in adoption

The Challenge: Access to robust data about the adoption sector at country and regional levels and intelligence on trends is vital to understanding the challenges we face and to confident planning, business choices and building productive partnerships with the statutory sector. Data and policy analysis is hard to resource for a single agency and research findings difficult to interrogate for their key practice implications. Wider societal and economic trends as well as political decision-making impact on the lives of birth families, potential adopters,

Our Goals

- ❖ To support our sector to be data-led in understanding adoption trends, business planning and innovation.
- ❖ To deliver high-quality, enhanced policy and information support, ensuring members have swift access to policy and research developments
- ❖ To develop improved routes for the sharing of knowledge across the membership and learning from other sectors and countries.

Ambition 5 Investing in our people:

Building skills and expertise across our sector, supporting leadership and succession planning.

The Challenge: A generation of experienced, inspirational leaders are set to leave the sector over the next few years, so succession planning is vital to maintain senior-level commitment to the ethos and values of the sector. Support for new leaders and strong leadership networks are needed to share challenges in safety and to maintain a strong cohort of sector leaders able to act collectively for the benefit of children. All small organisations struggle to find the resources to train staff, trustees and volunteers, with specialist staff often becoming isolated from their professional peers.

Our Goals

- ❖ To support and develop leadership and succession planning across the sector.
- ❖ To develop new networks and collaborations across the membership, building partnerships, reducing the isolation of specialist staff and sharing best practice.
- ❖ To expand and enhance the practice programme to support governance, business and front-line skills.

6. Measuring success

Achievements for each year of the strategy will be set out in an annual delivery plan, with output measures agreed and monitored by the Board. Our key performance indicators (KPI's) for the three-year strategy are set out in the table below.

| 1. A Sustainable Sector | |
|--|---|
| Strategic Outcomes | Evidenced By |
| More adopters come forward to provide loving homes for children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increase of 3% in market share for VAAs from the 2017/18 baseline • New audience awareness of VAA services • Greater access to early help and the ASF for VAA families |
| Children's waiting times reduce | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return to the level playing field across the UK • Cross-agency consistency in the application of the interagency fee |
| 2. System Leadership | |
| Strategic Outcomes | Evidenced By |
| VAAs lead the development of an adoption system fit for the future needs of children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase influence for VAAs and their families in key policy and practice developments, including birth family support and lifelong identity |
| The whole adoption system acts in the best interests of children for whom adoption is the best plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased understanding across key stakeholders about VAA support to adoptive families and the positive outcomes of adoption orders |
| 3. Innovation | |
| Strategic Outcomes | Evidenced By |
| The experience and aspirations of adoption children and adults, birth and adoptive families influence adoption policy and practice across the UK | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All VAAs are endorsed by service users, meeting inspection standards on service user involvement and aiding recruitment |
| Digital technologies provide innovative service solutions, enhancing the experience of adoptive families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VAAs increase their use of digital methodologies, enhancing services and business efficiencies from 2020 baseline survey |
| 4. Knowledge Hub | |
| Strategic Outcomes | Evidenced By |
| A data-led sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased access to sector-wide data for VAAs • VAAs able to use data for service planning and strategic decision-making |
| An evidence-led sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members are up to date with key policy changes affecting adoption and children's social care • Policy seminars and member events provide new learning and evidence of what works |
| 5. Investing in our People | |
| Strategic Outcomes | Evidenced By |
| Inspirational leadership for the adoption sector delivered by VAAs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All VAA CEOs are part of a valued peer support group • Aspiring leaders are identified within member organisations and successfully complete the Aspiring Leaders programme |
| Collaboration and partnerships delivering better services for families through a highly-skilled adoption workforce | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased opportunities for collaboration and joint working across the membership • Meet all targets set in the Practice Development Programme Business Plan |

CVAA is committed to robust monitoring and evaluation, not only to assure members of the value provided for their fees but also to share learning with members and others about what works and what does not. CVAA will lead by example in sharing our outcomes and learning from mistakes as well as celebrating success. We will seek funds for independent evaluations of externally-funded projects and work with members to secure resources for research which evidences the collective impact of their work with children and families.

The Board of Trustees will continue to receive quarterly monitoring reports and undertake an annual review of the strategy to ensure its continued relevance, given the uncertain environment in which adoption is developing across the UK. Board subcommittees will lead the development of particular projects and programmes, thus involving the wider membership in shaping and piloting products and new CVAA services.

Members will receive regular updates on individual areas of work through the monthly newsletter and a detailed annual progress report will be presented to the AGM.

External Partners will continue to receive the CVAA annual impact report containing highlights and progress against our Ambitions each year.

7. Conclusion

This is an ambitious strategy which aims to respond positively to members' aspirations and concerns alongside tackling the external pressures which impact on their ability to serve children well. CVAA is dedicated to supporting members in their life-changing work with children and families, sharing their commitment to putting children first, always. Finding loving, permanent homes for the many children waiting remains our highest collective priority. We are proud of the passion dedication and professionalism VAAs bring to the adoption system and are confident that working together, we can build a better world for children.