

CVAA submission to the Review's Call for Ideas

The Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies

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Overview

The CVAA's submission to the Review's call for feedback in August 2021¹ presented a number of key challenges affecting adopted children, and those children for whom adoption is the best permanency plan. Many of the challenges highlighted are not unique to adoption, but cut across the entire system of children's care. One critical theme was around how we create lifelong permanence for all children, whatever their care arrangement – through stable homes but also lasting relationships and connections which allow children to forge deep senses of identity. Our central idea in this paper therefore responds to this challenge.

Contact with birth families is one highly important factor in establishing lifelong permanence, which the Review's Case for Change referenced frequently, and which the adoption sector is eager to transform in line with the latest research on what is best for children's development.² However emotional permanence is about more than regular contact; for children to develop lasting, meaningful connections there needs to be suitable support available for everyone involved. Children and birth parents often have to work through deep trauma and difficult feelings of loss in order to build positive, enduring relationships – with adoptive parents and other carers having significant roles along this journey. Additionally, contact cannot be seen apart from other vital interventions which develop and strengthen children's identities, such as life story work. Identity, after all, is about making sense of the past as well as maintaining on-going connection.

In recognition of this goal shared by the Review and CVAA that care should 'make rather than break relationships', our national connection service proposal below addresses this fundamental need, for all children whose lives have been fractured by the need for state intervention. This paper also puts forward additional ideas which respond to three deep-rooted challenges affecting adopted and care experienced children and young people:

1. Resource constraints on local authority decision-making which affect the care plans children are given and which families they are placed with, rather than these decisions being made solely on the basis of children's best interests.
2. Significant variation in waiting times for children with a plan for adoption, including increasing waiting times for children with 'harder to place' characteristics.
3. The disparity between resourcing for adoption, special guardianship, kinship care and other care placements despite the often similar experiences and needs of children placed in all these settings.

The CVAA would welcome the opportunity to work with the Review to develop these proposals further.

¹ [CVAA-Response-to-the-Case-for-Change.pdf](#)

² In fact, the sector is already evolving in its approach to adoption, given that traditional forms of contact such as letterbox contact are becoming obsolete in today's digital world. ARC Adoption NE, for example, is developing its digital platform for life story work ARCBOX to improve contact for children: <https://www.arcadoptionne.org.uk/life-story>

A national connection service

The challenge: Continued connection with birth families and friends³ is extremely important for children's positive and lifelong sense of identity, and this is acknowledged by most adoptive parents who are very willing to support their children with birth family contact. However, navigating these relationships is complex and requires highly skilled support for everyone involved. This support is almost non-existent at present – organisations that seek to deliver birth parent support, such as charities and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs), are working with little and unpredictable funding. The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory's recent map⁴ of services for parents in recurrent proceedings shows what kind of patchy postcode lottery this has led to. This lack of investment is mirrored across the entire care system, often resulting in contact which is poorly managed, unimaginative, and restricted by red-tape. The impact on the mental health of children and carers is significant and far too many care-experienced adults are left to navigate a complex, incoherent system when seeking information about their early lives.

The solution: A new national connection (contact) service could dramatically transform the lives and futures of both adopted children and children in other forms of care, by making it easier for families to maintain relationships and providing professional support to develop appropriate connections as children and young people's needs and aspirations change.

This service would bring the advantages of national delivery standards and independence, while keeping individual decision-making local with the children, young people, carers and frontline professionals who know children and families best. A national service could tackle practical challenges such as coordinating contact across different LAs/regions, develop resource and expertise among social workers and alleviate the sometimes adversarial relationships between birth parents and LAs following removal of children.

Core elements would include:

- A comprehensive, easy to access website with resources for care experienced children, young people and adults, carers, families and professionals with case studies and online peer support
- A Connections Helpline to offer advice and support
- Drawing on the latest research and digital technology, advice on building bespoke, flexible contact plans for children which support their changing needs as they grow up.
- Guidance for LAs in improving life story work, building on the specialist life story work being done by some VAAs and RAAs
- Support with seeking information about historic adoptions, and over time the service could become a national repository and access point for all care records.

It is clear that relationship support for all care experienced children must be radically reformed. We are currently failing children, adding to their trauma and creating barriers for families. Serious investment is required to fulfil our duties towards children who cannot live with their families of origin and to increase professional and judicial confidence in permanency options which genuinely prioritise relationships and lifelong identity.

A national matching facility with 'top up' funding

The challenge: There is significant variation in waiting times for children with a plan for adoption, depending on their needs/characteristics and the local authority they reside in. The proportion of children with 'harder to place' characteristics waiting longer than 18 months continues to grow, and children and adopters of colour typically experience much longer waiting times than their white peers.⁵ At present there are insufficient mechanisms to

³ Including previous carers.

⁴ [Interactive map of services to support parents who experienced recurrent care proceedings - Nuffield Family Justice Observatory \(nuffieldfjo.org.uk\)](https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk)

⁵ [Adoption strategy \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

match children with the right families no matter where they are in the country. Inconsistencies in the use of the matching platform Linkmaker (which typically has a few hundred children on its platform compared with the thousands who have adoption as their permanency plan) combined with a lack of timely data creates confusion and undermines the system's ability to take coordinated action to reduce waiting times. In addition, the long waiting times for children over 5, in sibling groups or with complex needs inhibits decision makers and the judiciary in choosing adoption as the best permanency plan for such children, denying them the benefits of a lifelong adoptive family.

Solution: The development of a national agency-neutral matching facility would ensure that the right family is found, in a timely way, for every child who is identified as needing additional matching support, no matter where the adopters live. The Scottish and Welsh adoption registers, Linkmaker, and good practice models such as the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) – which identified priority children in the South West, delivered bespoke matching events for these children, and embedded new matching processes and tools across the region – provide positive options for breaking down geographical and bureaucratic barriers to get children to the adopters willing to provide their forever homes.

The facility would benefit from a forecasting tool or framework to understand the predicted needs of children who may end up unable to live with their birth parents, and ensure that recruitment, training, and support for adopters and special guardians are targeted to meet those needs.⁶

With this capability, it would be possible to allocate extra 'top up' funding for children identified early on as likely to wait the longest.⁷ This would be game-changing in incentivising *all* placing agencies (LAs, RAAs and VAAs) to meet this single, child-focused goal. The top-up funding would go towards specialised family finding processes, including investment in preparing adopters and special guardians to meet the child's need and developing strong post placement support plans, which is crucial to ensure permanence and to guard against future placement breakdowns.

A national matching facility for adoption could bring useful learnings for the wider sector, especially fostering, where matching is also a significant challenge and area where reform is needed.⁸

Funding following the child

The challenge: Every day across the care system, decisions about children are influenced by money, rather than children's best interests alone. In the adoption sector, this manifests in children sometimes not being adopted by the best available family, because of the moderate fees involved in placing with VAA families. This happens despite the value created by adoption services, which unlike fostering and residential care services are all non-profit making. Across the wider system too, decisions about where children live are frequently dictated by resourcing priorities of stretched local authority services, rather than being child-centred. There are grave costs to children and society of continuing along this course.

The solution: One promising solution is reconfiguring the system so that money is allocated entirely based on need and follows the child, regardless of who cares for them. In the United States, for example, an assessment is made of a child's needs as they enter care and resources are allocated using a formula that includes personal care as well as educational and health requirements. The resulting pot follows the child no matter what their care placement – kinship care, foster care, or adoption. This means placement decisions are not driven by resources, and the unhelpful separation of budget lines for individual services do not impact on care planning decisions.⁹ The government's impending Procurement Bill is also an opportunity to reconsider the ways in which the procurement system fails

⁶ To support this, we need further research into preparation groups and other training and resources that are available to adopters pre- and post-placement, and the relationship between these resources and children's outcomes.

⁷ Agreed national criteria (such as The Family Linking and Assessment Guide (FLAG), developed with a DfE PIF grant by Adoption Matters, Caritas Care, and Adoption Counts) could be used to identify these children.

⁸ The Fostering Network, for example, has called for a review of matching in foster care: [State of the Nation Report 2021 DIGITAL FINAL 0.pdf \(thefosteringnetwork.org.uk\)](#)

⁹ This goal is also shared by Children England, which has put forward the idea of a 'care bank' which would remove the price of care from the equation in social work decisions.

children and families across the children's social care system and there are helpful lessons to be learnt from the personal independence payments received by people with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

We know that in order to heal and thrive, children who have suffered early trauma require dedicated support, no matter what care setting they live in. There is a strong case for an 'early intervention' support package to be made available for all of these children in the first 12-18 months of placement, as of right, not dependent on an application. The package could be used to support a range of appropriate interventions, reducing the risk of cost crisis interventions and placement breakdown in future. The Adoption and Permanence APPG has already recommended this approach as part of its report on adoption support to be implemented within current funding streams, through the Adoption Support Fund, alongside a comprehensive evaluation to show return on investment.¹⁰

Parity of support for all carers

The challenge: At present there is a lack of parity in preparation, pre and post-placement support across permanency options. Adopters undertake rigorous assessment and training, whilst the assessment of special guardians and other kinship carers is variable, and they often receive no training at all – despite the similarities in the needs of the children for whom they take responsibility. This runs the risk of children with complex needs not getting the level of support required for them to thrive.

Solution: A system where money follows the child, as outlined above, would respond to this challenge by reallocating resource depending on need. However, there are other more immediate solutions which could address discrepancies in the system. First is for special guardians to be just as rigorously assessed and prepared as adopters, so that decisions about kinship care plans are as robust as its alternatives. In some cases, preparation and training could be made available concurrently to prevent delays in children moving in. VAAs are ready to use their skills and capacity to extend training on trauma-informed parenting for special guardians, as well as provide assessments and co-ordinate peer support.

For true parity of support, children with comparable needs should be able to access support (e.g. therapeutic interventions) with the same ease. It should not, for example, be harder for children living with adopted parents via a VAA to get this support than a child in another form of care, or for children in special guardian placements to receive less support than those adopted. Additionally, adopted children and those in SG placements should not be excluded from the post-18 support available to care leavers, if their needs are similar.

¹⁰ https://appgap.info/s/APPG_Report_Strengthening_Families_Sept_21_Final.pdf