

State of the voluntary adoption sector

Winter 2020/21



Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies

This briefing is based on intelligence-gathering phone calls made to 24 out of 26 VAAs across the UK in December 2020 and January 2021.

Between 8 December 2020 and 27 January 2021, we spoke to 24 out of 26 CVAA members. Members were asked about placements, recruitment and the national adopter recruitment campaign (England), linking and matching, finances, children's needs, adoption support, and how staff teams are doing.

Key messages

- More than half of CVAA members (14) expect to meet or exceed their **placement targets** this year. A large minority of agencies (10) expect to fall short of their targets.
- **Recruitment is very strong** for the vast majority of members, with 20 VAAs expecting to meet or exceed their targets.
- Most VAAs placed a high proportion of **children with 'harder to place' characteristics**, but also continue to place at least some proportion of children with less complex needs. Seven agencies reporting that roughly 50% of the children they had placed would not be considered 'harder to place'.
- Almost all VAAs (21) feel that all or most of the adopters currently going through assessment or waiting to be matched are the right people to **meet the needs of the children waiting**.
- Most agencies (16) reported that their families' **adoption support requirements have increased** over lockdown.
- Eight agencies expect to end the financial year in deficit, seven expect to break even and a further seven expect to achieve at least a small surplus.
- The **interagency fee is still being paid up front** by a number of RAAs and LAs. In Wales, payment of the interagency fee at the point of match has become standard practice.
- Almost every VAA told us that there has been **a bit of a morale dip** lately, with 11 agencies finding the current period particularly challenging. However, over half of agencies (13) reported that staff morale is currently good or excellent.
- **Key concerns for the future** include the reduction in children with adoption as their permanency plan, and the impact of increasing financial pressures on LAs and RAAs.

Placement activity

Despite a slow start to 2020/21, with placement activity much delayed due to the onset of the pandemic, a majority of VAAs expect to meet (11) or exceed (3) their placement targets this year. Most agencies have not seen a notable decline in the visibility of children coming through, in that LAs/RAAs are sharing children's profiles as much as they ever have, and sequential family-finding is an ongoing concern throughout the country.

This outlook is an improvement from September 2020, when only 9 VAAs reported being cautiously optimistic about meeting or exceeding their placement targets for the year. At that time, a majority

(12 out of 21) VAAs expected to fall short of this year's placement targets; this has since fallen to 10 out of 24 agencies.

There does not seem to be a consistent reason for either exceeding or falling short of placement targets, as almost all agencies are recruiting many more adopters than expected and therefore have or will have available placements. Early in the autumn, most agencies were finding that their adopters were 'snapped up' as soon as they were approved. However, delays in court proceedings mean there are fewer children coming through for adoption, and pandemic-induced delays in linking/matching and transitions are affecting the rate at which placements were being made. This position has now changed somewhere, with fewer delays in matching and transitions due to Covid-19 restrictions, but increasing difficulty in securing placements for approved adopters in some areas of the country.

A few agencies felt that delays in the courts are affecting their placement numbers, and seven agencies have experienced a drop in referrals and delays in linking activity.

Six agencies currently have very little sight of children coming through aside from on Linkmaker. This is concerning because there has been a reduction of almost 50% in the children's profiles being made available on Linkmaker from 2019/20 to 2020/21, and geographical matching restrictions placed on children's profiles are a growing concern.

Conversely, VAAs that have good relationships and/or flexible contracts with LAs/RAAs report little change in the visibility of children coming through.

Recruitment

Recruitment is very strong for the vast majority of members, with 20 VAAs expecting to meet or exceed their targets given a high level of enquiries and the quality of prospective adopters coming through. This is the good news story of the pandemic. Extra time for reflection and a heightened sense of needing to pursue big life decisions seems to have compelled many people to go from just thinking about adoption to making an enquiry or registering their interest.

Two agencies cited the fact that they have a dedicated enquiries team as one of the reasons for their recruitment performance this year. One agency cited hiring a dedicated marketing officer as contributing to improved recruitment this year compared to 2019/20.

Four agencies expect to fall short of their recruitment targets for the year. These agencies have cited employment uncertainty for applicants, delays in the assessment process (especially in obtaining adopter medicals), and a lack of social worker capacity to undertake assessments.

Most agencies are expecting employment uncertainty and delays in medicals to become more pressing issues over the next 6-12 months.

Another major concern is an impending over-supply of adopters. ASGLB data for April-September 2020 shows that the ongoing downward trend in placement orders granted has continued during the pandemic, with a further sharp reduction that is most likely a result of pandemic-related delays in the courts. However, there is still no clarity as to what permanency options are replacing adoption or these children, and the system still does not understand what is driving the overall trend away from adoption.

Children's needs

In 2020, the majority of VAAs placed a high proportion of children with 'harder to place' characteristics or complex needs, including medical uncertainty. However, most VAAs continue to place at least some proportion of children with less complex needs, with 7 agencies reporting that roughly 50% of the children they had placed would not be considered 'harder to place'.

Many VAAs have reported decreased visibility of all but the 'harder to place' children in recent years, which has led some to question whether the sector should put more public emphasis on VAAs' expertise in placing these children. However, agencies told us that putting this message out to the public might result in good potential adopters ruling themselves out. Furthermore, almost every agency emphasised the work that they do to 'stretch' adopters over the course of the assessment process, and did not feel that the VAA sector should pigeonhole itself with this kind of public messaging.

Almost all VAAs (21) feel that all or most of the adopters currently going through assessment or waiting to be matched are the right people to meet the needs of the children waiting.

Adoption support

Sixteen agencies reported that their families' adoption support requirements have increased over lockdown, with four agencies noting that this was particularly the case for families with teenagers.

There is wide variation in the impact of remote schooling. Two agencies reported increased support needs due to children being home, while three other agencies noted that many families were appreciating and benefitting from the removal of school-related stressors.

While some agencies have delivered pieces of work through the Covid-19 ASF scheme, most VAAs' adoption support offer has not been impacted (either positively or negatively) by the pandemic. Where agencies had support contracts with LAs/RAAs, these have continued, and statutory agencies have been happy for delivery to be virtual given the constraints of lockdown.

Agencies who deliver training or resources virtually have seen an increase in demand for this type of work.

In September 2020, we asked the ten VAAs that work with schools to report on whether the pandemic had affected this work. Most of these agencies work with schools on an ad hoc basis or provide specific liaison services for individual children and families. These agencies, along with one VAA with a programme that puts social workers in schools, have continued to deliver what they can virtually - e.g. training videos, some remote liaison work - but schools were not clear about their expectations for the new school year.

Finances

Though it has been a very difficult and unpredictable year for all agencies, the sector will find itself in a better position at the end of March than many would have predicted at the start of the pandemic.

While eight agencies expect to end the financial year in deficit, seven expect to break even and a further seven expect to achieve at least a small surplus. No agencies feel that they are in danger of closure. Many have used reserves to remain viable, and some have used the furlough scheme to help pace their expenditure and balance their budgets.

The interagency fee is still being paid up front by a number of RAAs and LAs, with six VAAs reporting that they always or frequently invoice for this and receive payment at the point of matching ADM. Two agencies reported that they occasionally receive payment up front, but that this was not standard. The proposal to extend this arrangement for the rest of the financial year was received sympathetically by RAA leaders and DfE, but ultimately the choice remains with DCSSs.

In Wales, payment of the interagency fee at the point of match has become standard practice, and we hope that this will remain the case beyond the end of the pandemic.

Return to face-to-face working

In September 2020, we asked members about their plans for returning to face-to-face working – both in offices, and with families. Ten agencies reported having no intention of bringing staff back into the office for the foreseeable future, mainly because of logistical restrictions on social distancing and lack of space to implement one-way systems. Seven VAAs told us that they had some kind of rota or informal system in place, i.e. where a certain number of people can be in the office and individual staff members have to book or check with other staff if they want to work from the office on any given day.

All agencies will be taking the next few months to consider their working models going forward, including what will continue to be delivered digitally and whether to give up some office space.

As of September, many (12) agencies had begun regularly seeing families face-to-face on a case-by-case basis. These agencies reported prioritising face-to-face work to undertake placements, visit adopters in Stage 2 (as by now most prospective adopters began the assessment process virtually), and provide support for families in crisis.

Staff morale

VAA leaders have told us about staff moving heaven and earth to continue supporting children and families. All agencies have implemented a number of new approaches to supporting staff, including social distanced picnics (weather allowing), Zoom coffee hours, regular virtual all-staff meetings, and more frequent staff surveys.

With the current reintroduction of restrictions combined with winter weather, short daytime hours, and the reintroduction of remote learning, almost every VAA told us that there has been a bit of a morale dip lately. Everyone has been working so hard to get through what initially felt like a crisis period, and now there is a growing sense that life and work are going to be unsettled for much longer than anyone had initially anticipated. However, over half of agencies (13) reported that staff morale is currently good or excellent, while eleven are finding the current period to be particularly challenging.

When we spoke to members in September, six of them had recently conducted a staff survey and received mainly positive results. The majority of staff in these agencies felt positive or very positive about working from home. All agencies that spoke to at the time told us that they were considering how best to maintain a mix of office and home working in the long term.

Key concerns for the future

The primary concern across the voluntary sector is the reduction in children with adoption as their permanency plan. This has been a trend for the last three years, but concern is increasing with the pandemic-induced delays to court proceedings combined with a perceived change in attitude from both courts and social workers to adoption.

VAAAs are also concerned about the impact of increasing financial pressures on LAs and RAAs. While this has been ongoing for many years, the pandemic has exacerbated the pressures on budgets for children's services (and particularly adoption). There is anecdotal evidence from VAAAs that statutory family finders are increasingly engaging in explicit sequential decision-making due to budget constraints. At least three agencies in different regions of England have recently told us about their adopters being linked with children, only for the LA/RAA to later withdraw because an 'in-house' family had become available.

The above two trends are bolstering a growing concern across the sector that, similar to the period following the Expansion Grants, VAAAs will find themselves with an excess supply of adopters, and adoption will once again gain a reputation amongst the general public as 'taking too long' or 'being too difficult'. This is something that agencies are carefully considering, especially in the context of increased enquiries during the pandemic and the National Recruitment Campaign in England.

While the pandemic has generated increased interest in adoption, many agencies are concerned that increasing economic uncertainty – stemming from both the pandemic and Brexit – may put downward pressure on both enquiries as well as prospective adopters currently in the assessment process. This remains to be seen and is a dynamic that we will be watching closely over the next 12-18 months.

Furthermore, although agencies are certainly pleased with the increase in prospective adopters coming forward, they are less certain about any long-term impacts that virtual preparation and assessment might have on the stability of adoptive placements. VAAAs continue to deliver all of their pre-pandemic training virtually, but many have expressed concern that there are fundamental differences between virtual and in-person preparation and assessment. This is another dynamic that we and our members will be keeping a close eye on in the coming years.

Finally, many agencies have expressed concern about reducing support (from an already low base) for birth families and adopted adults. Birth parent support has been difficult to deliver digitally, and agencies report that birth parents are having a very difficult time in lockdown as the pandemic has exacerbated anxieties about adopted children's wellbeing. One VAA has reported a huge increase in tracing and support enquiries from birth parents and adopted adults, which they attribute to additional time to reflect combined with recent coverage of Irish mother & baby homes. However, at least two other agencies that would normally deliver tracing and support services have been unable to do so, because all the physical adoption records are stored at the agencies' office premises.