

Research briefing: VAA analysis on the interagency fee for adoptive families 12+ months since placement

Background

This analysis relates to a survey of CVAA's members undertaken in March-April 2022. The survey was completed by 21 voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) from across the UK¹, which represents a completion rate of 84% among CVAA's members.

This briefing summarises VAA responses to questions about the Interagency fee in cases where children have been placed with adopters for over 12 months and an Adoption Order (AO) has not yet been made. The fee was £896 per month in England and Wales and £898 in Scotland in 2021/22, and in April 2022 rose to £939 and £941 respectively. It was brought in to compensate VAAs for the continued work that happens with families prior to an AO being made.

The purpose of this research was to better understand how the fee is used by VAAs and learn more about its value for money. The research also looked at how timescales for AOs being granted have changed over time and possible reasons for these changes, where applicable.

Adopters waiting over 12 months for an Adoption Order

Since January 2020, a total of **173** VAA adopters have had a child placed with them for over 12 months without an Adoption Order being made.² The highest number of adopters in this position that any agency had across this 2-year period was 26.³

VAAs reported that on average 11 hours of support was provided per month to a family in this position. This estimate is inclusive of all visits, communication and administrative support.

It is important to note that agencies struggled to estimate this data, therefore we have also looked at qualitative responses that agencies provided. A number of agencies stated that social workers visit every 4-6 weeks at the minimum, with visits lasting around 2 hours. Agencies stressed that some families require far more frequent visits depending on their circumstances, which can range from weekly social worker visits to intensive therapeutic support and parenting support. There are also less obvious on-going costs such as maintaining online adopter support platforms.

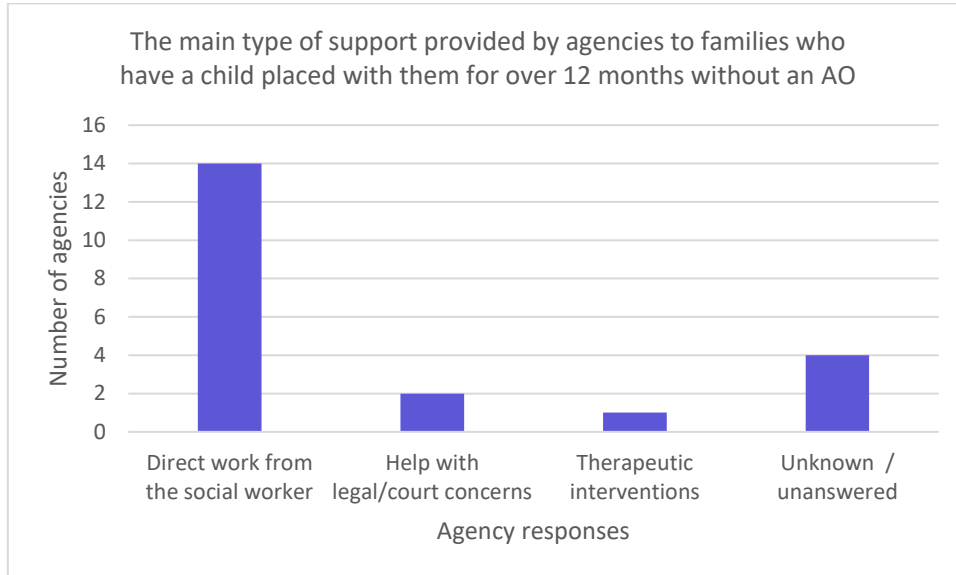
Two agencies chose to quantify the level of support provided by specifying the staff time allocated to this. They both gave figures in the region of 30-40 hours of staff resource per month, with one agency specifying this is not inclusive of administrative work.

¹ Although some agencies were unable to provide answers to certain questions.

² One agency was only able to report the number of adopters it has currently in this position. Therefore the total of 173 will be an underestimate.

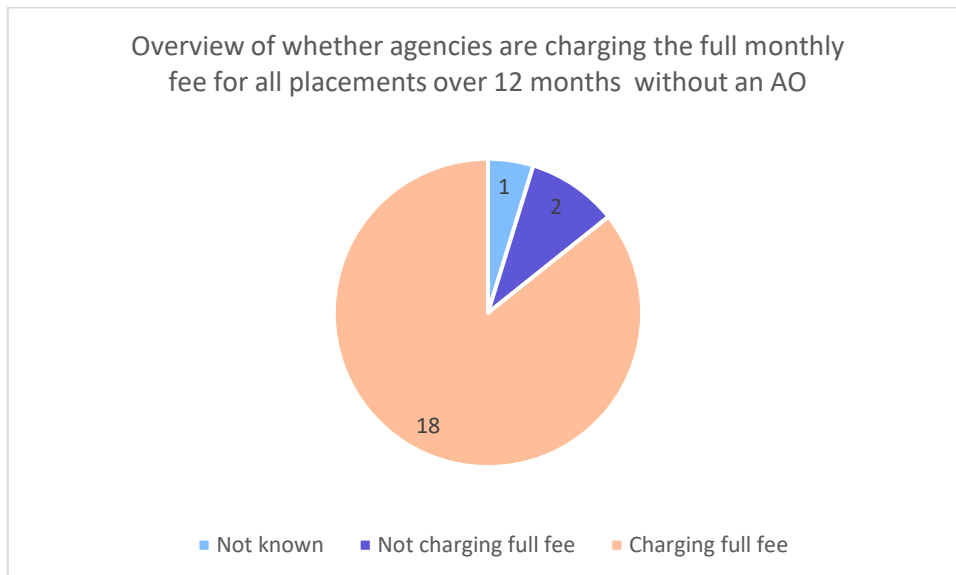
³ The period of time considered was January 2020 until late March/early April 2022, so slightly over 2 years.

As shown in the graph below, most support to adopters took the form of social worker visits or 'direct work'. For a minority of agencies the main type of support was legal support or therapeutic interventions.



Charging of the monthly fee

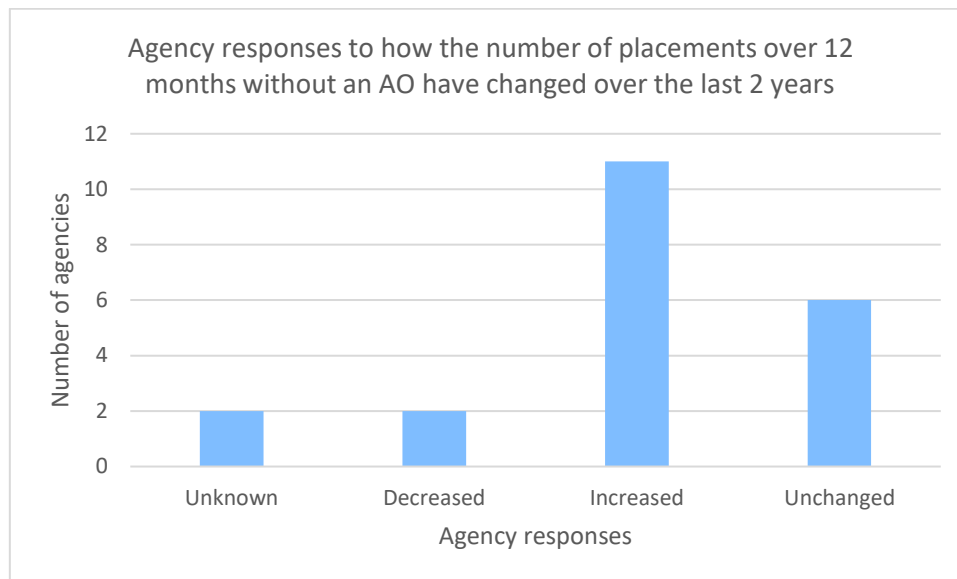
The majority of agencies are charging the full monthly fee for all placements over 12 months without an AO.



When agencies did not charge the full fee, this was for the following reasons:

- If it had been decided that the family only required a low level of support
- If the placing agency provided a fostering social worker to oversee the fostering aspects of the placement, therefore support tasks were shared. In these cases only half the monthly support fee would be charged, one agency told us.

Additionally, the majority of agencies stated that the number of placements over 12 months without an AO has increased over the last 2 years.



Agencies expressed views that the following factors contributed to these changes, in order of how frequently they were mentioned:

- General comments about the impact of the Covid pandemic
- Delays in the Courts, which was often linked to the pandemic. Agencies noted that delays in AOs being granted have mirrored delays across the entire adoption journey since the start of the pandemic. One agency expressed the view that delays were partly owing to prioritisation of care proceedings cases and other urgent cases, as well as the shift to virtual working.
- The impact of the recent Somerset ruling.
- A rise in the number of contested cases. One agency stated that this was unusual in the past when AOs would typically be made at first hearings, however contested cases are now the norm which means there can be numerous hearings before the AO is eventually granted, with an average of 4-6 weeks in-between hearings. Other agencies suggested that more birth parents are encouraged to contest than previously, and referenced late appeals from birth parents.
- Delays in local authority processes due to staff absences / shortages – again linked to the pandemic. One case example was given of the social worker changing 4 times, in addition to managers changing.
- Adopters being reluctant to put in their applications until they have secured a robust adoption support package or support via the Adoption Support Fund.
- Adopters needing more time to settle with the child in placement, especially given the challenging context of parenting in the pandemic.
- LA social workers demonstrating limited knowledge of adoption and the processes, resulting in agency social workers having to advise and push for certain actions to be completed throughout the process.

It is important to note that as well as delays contributing to longer periods of VAAs working with families pre Adoption Order, the continuing support demanded of these circumstances tends to be



greater than typical post Adoption Order contact and support. This requires significant resourcing and impacts on VAAs' capacity to provide services elsewhere. The fee is therefore vital and necessary to enable VAAs to complete this pre-order work and ensure families are well-supported during this often challenging period.