

Address the gaps in the care review – CVAA’s message to government ahead of its formal response

It is anticipated that the government in England will make its formal response to the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care final report (published in May 2022) in early 2023. Ahead of this response being published, the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) is sharing its own response to the final report, reflecting the views of voluntary adoption agencies across the country, urging Government to address the gaps in the report concerning adoption.

The 2-page section on adoption in the Review’s final report (‘4.3 Modernising Adoption’, pages 109-110) certainly reflects important themes which CVAA has long advocated for, including the need for all children – those adopted and in care – to have much greater support to maintain significant relationships in their lives, alongside far better support for birth families.¹ These are vital recommendations and change in this respect is essential to the flourishing of all children who cannot live in their families of origin. This is both a responsibility for the adoption sector which must improve its practice, and the government which must properly fund services to adapt and grow.

Very welcome too was the recognition given to kinship carers who invariably make significant life changes to care for the children they take responsibility for, and love as their own. Kinship carers, like adopters, parent children who have had the toughest early life experiences and have high levels of need, therefore it is only right that these carers get parity of support and training with adopters.

However, CVAA remains perplexed that the final report failed to address a number of the most serious issues facing the adoption sector right now, which impact on adopted children and families day in, day out. In fact, the report gave the strong impression that the current adoption system is serving children well, save for better contact; a message reinforced by positive references to the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) programme and the establishment of the Adoption Support Fund.

The dramatic decline in numbers of children being adopted in recent years, the greater proportion of children waiting over 18 months to be matched with adopters, and the crisis in adoption support are all absent in the Review’s final report, despite being major challenges threatening the entire future of adoption. This lack of attention leads us to question **who is taking responsibility for robustly interrogating how the adoption system is meeting the needs of children?** A question which is even more salient now than when the Care Review was published, given the abolition of the ASGLB at the end of December 2022. The report defers to the government’s recent Adoption Strategy, although this was not independent, and fails to note that evaluations of the RAA programme have been inconclusive. The lack of scrutiny is alarming not just for adopted children and families, but because trends in adoption have implications for the decisions made for children across all forms of care. Moreover, if the Review’s recommendation about the regionalisation of all care services is accepted by the government and modelled on regional adoption agencies (RAAs), the current adoption system will have implications for the structures which support all children in care across the UK.

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

Below we summarise three core issues which demonstrate why adopted children (and those with the potential to be adopted) should not be overlooked in the government's response to the care review. We present them alongside suggestions of how the government and the sector can tackle them, aided by the knowledge and support of the voluntary sector.

1. The strategy does not address the falling numbers of children being adopted, despite evidence consistently showing that adopted children have the best life chances of all children entering the care system.²

The number of children being adopted has almost halved since transformation plans for the adoption system were set out in 2015, decreasing from 5,360 Adoption Orders granted in 2015 to 2,950 in 2022. This sudden drop is particularly concerning because there is no evidence that children no longer being adopted are thriving elsewhere. There is no data being collected on where and how these children are now. Although there have been more Special Guardianship Orders granted than Adoption Orders over the last 4 years, this trend does not offer a full explanation of where children not adopted are living instead. This is because the total number of permanence orders (Adoption and Special Guardianship Orders combined) is almost 500 lower than in 2018/19 despite the numbers of children in care rising.

As adoption numbers fall, the number of children in care is rising, with far too many experiencing chronic instability in the form of frequent placement moves,³ suffering from poor mental health,⁴ and not reaching their potential, as evidenced by DfE outcomes statistics.⁵ Equally, the relative newness of Special Guardianship orders means there is little evidence on the outcomes of children living in these families – although this would be very welcome.

We have to question as a sector and as a society whether it is right for adoption to slowly disappear from the picture of care, while the evidence of its benefits remains so powerful, and in the absence of evidence indicating that children are better off in other arrangements. Adoption has the additional benefit of creating billions in value each year for adopted children, families and society for every child adopted (at least £1.3million for every child adopted), thus reducing the strain on the wider social care system. We are therefore urging the government to give attention to this trend in their response, to protect children's futures and avoid childhoods spent in insecure care with no ongoing support into adulthood.

² Best evidenced in 2022 research from the University of Oxford and Barnardos (Australia) which found considerable differences between outcomes of adopted children and those in care: Ward, H. et al (2022). Outcomes of Open Adoption from Care: An Australian Contribution to an International Debate. Palgrave Macmillan/ Springer. Available at: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2022-04-06-abused-children-who-were-adopted-did-significantly-better-those-brought-care?s=09>

³ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/stability-index-2020/>

⁴ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/latest/10000-children-and-young-people-in-care-share-views-on-their-wellbeing-in-largest-survey-of-its-kind/>

⁵ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2021>

- We need a proactive strategy to scrutinise falling adoption numbers and robust evidence on the outcomes of children in different types of permanence placements, to guide care planning decisions at a national level.
- As CVAA has previously recommended there needs to be greater investment in the partnership between children’s social care and the courts, so that judges routinely receive solid evidence and feedback about the outcomes of their decisions.⁶
- Measures should be taken to re-instil knowledge about adoption in care planning services following the loss of this expertise during regionalisation. For example, investment in social worker training on the merits of different permanency options, and requirements that experts in all permanency options feed into care planning decisions.

2. Over the last 5 years, the number of children waiting extreme lengths of time to be matched has increased. The adoption system is therefore failing the most vulnerable children with more complex characteristics or needs.

Between 2016/17 and 2021/22 the percentage of children in England with a Placement Order waiting over 18 months to be matched since entering care has sharply risen from 27% to 52%.⁷ This trend has taken place across the time period that local authority adoption services have been regionalised, and has continued despite the adoption strategy’s aims to reduce waiting times for children by recruiting the right adopters to match the needs of the children waiting.

Waiting times for children also vary enormously across the country, creating an unacceptable postcode lottery for the nation’s most vulnerable children. While some areas are steadily improving waiting times year on year, others are allowing timescales to slip. For example, in one area, average waiting times (from entry into care to adoption) for the children waiting longest⁸ increased by 15 months in the space of a year (2019/20-2020/21).⁹ Every day that a permanent home is not found for a child, there is a greater chance the child will struggle to settle in their new home when they do move. There is also a greater risk that they will never be adopted at all.

The government’s response needs to address improvements in the recruitment and ongoing support for adopters who can care for children with the highest levels of need. Since voluntary adoption agencies have proven expertise in recruiting adopters for children who tend to wait the longest, this includes considering strategies to promote partnerships with the voluntary sector which plays a valuable role in providing choice and long term support for adopters. Currently cuts to public funding are disincentivising RAAs and LAs from placing children with VAA adopters because of the cost of the interagency fee. This is despite the value of the fee which 2009 research found was almost £14,000 less than the actual cost of the work completed. We would like the government to explore options for supporting RAAs/LAs to match children with VAA adopters, where this would reduce waiting

⁶ <https://cvaa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CVAA-Response-to-the-Case-for-Change.pdf>

⁷ Headline Measures: Q4 2021/22 report: <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

⁸ Meaning the top 100 children in England who had the longest journey from entry into care to adoption

⁹ ASGLB (2022) Top 100 Children with the Longest Journeys from Entry into Care to Adoption, Unpublished.

times for children and give them entitlements to the lifelong support which VAAs are unique in offering to their families.

- Government could support or resource a return to a single interagency fee structure, and/or create a scheme of 'top up funding' that incentivises all placing agencies (LAs, RAAs and VAAs) to secure adopters for the children who wait the longest, at the very least until the backlog of children waiting is eliminated.
- Resources should follow the child, enabling all decisions to be taken based solely on the best interests of the child and providing financial assistance to adopters and kinship carers willing to parent children with disabilities and life limiting conditions.

3. Inefficiencies within the Adoption Support Fund are resulting in significant delays in children accessing therapy (which can push families into crisis) and long gaps in the year when children's therapy is interrupted or delayed.

At its best, the Adoption Support Fund can be life-changing for children and families. However, its structure creates a two-tier system in which some children supported by non-statutory agencies face more barriers accessing the funds than other children, despite the fact these children usually have the highest levels of need. A series of recent adjustments to the fund¹⁰ have resulted in it being even harder to access, causing ever-increasing difficulties for the families it exists to help. Long delays in receiving help, families being forced to go through repeated assessments with different professionals, and children having to endure significant gaps in treatment at the start of every year are just a few examples of how administrative barriers are damaging the children the Fund was established to support.

In recent months two voluntary adoption agencies have taken the decision to withdraw from using the ASF on the basis of the excessive administrative costs associated with accessing it. These agencies previously supported many families via the Fund, so the fact that they have taken these decisions shows just how unworkable the system is becoming, and indicates the very real prospect of more agencies following suit – with children and families suffering as a result.

- It is within the government's power to remove duplication and inefficiencies at every stage within the ASF process – assessment, approval, application and payment – and take a substantial burden off LAs, RAAs and VAAs as a result. VAAs are open to piloting new processes to establish a better service for children and families.
- Likewise, the reversal of recent changes to the ASF such as no longer paying therapists for the time spent travelling would mean that families are no longer disadvantaged on the basis of where they live, and would allow adoption agencies to continue to offer flexible services to families in desperate need of support.
- We urge consideration of ringfenced funding within the ASF to provide all adoptive and special guardian families with a bespoke package of early support in the first 12-18 months

¹⁰ From April 2022 it was announced that payments will be made in arrears not in advance, and therapists' travel time will no longer be paid for. The government is also consulting on further changes to the fund which are likely to affect the quality of adoption support work and the sustainability of agencies and therapists delivering that work.

of placement. This would reduce family breakdown and the need to draw on more expensive crisis interventions later on.

A note on Regional Care Collectives

The recommendation for Regional Care Collectives (RCCs) to be established in the Review's final report makes it even more critical that all the impacts of the RAA programme in adoption are robustly analysed. We recognise the ambition of the regionalisation agenda in adoption and the benefits it has brought in some regions including economies of scale, sharing good practice and data, and increasing partnership approaches.¹¹ Yet successes have come at great cost, financially and in terms of disruption and timeliness.

The most recent evaluation of RAAs summarises the goals of the RAA programme as follows:

“The RAAs were expected to pool resources resulting in targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters; speedier matching with a larger, more diverse pool of adopters; and an improved range of adoption support services and regulatory compliance. Overall, in the longer term, RAAs were expected to provide better outcomes for children and adopters; reduced practice and performance inconsistencies; more effective strategic management of the service to deliver efficiency savings; and a culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with the Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) sector.”¹²

However the evaluation found that:

- Between 2017 and 2020 children waiting times for children increased rather than decreased (page 12)
- Despite increases in adopter enquiries in recent years, recruitment has not substantially changed the profile of adopters and brought greater diversity (page 16)
- The evaluation's accompanying survey of parents who adopted via RAAs showed that there was no statistical difference in their ratings of adoption support services before and after the establishment of RAAs.¹³ There were the same complaints from adoptive parents as have been reported in previous studies and reviews, including of a lack of information, delays in assessments and the provision of services and poor social work practice (page 31)
- In this survey the 'fragmented' communication between the RAA/LA and other partners such as the virtual school and educational psychologists was also noted (page 36).

Regarding the longer term goals of the programme, the evaluation found that:

- Despite reforms being announced in 2015, by 2021 it was still too soon to see improvements in practice being consistently reflected in the ultimate outcomes of timeliness and efficiency (page 16)

¹¹ [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies second report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/86424/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies-second-report.pdf)

¹² [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies: final report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/86424/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies-final-report.pdf)

¹³ [Supporting adoptive families the views of adoptive parents in 4 regional adoption agencies \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/86424/supporting-adoptive-families-the-views-of-adoptive-parents-in-4-regional-adoption-agencies.pdf)

- Of the ‘core elements’ meant to define an RAA, there was limited evidence among RAAs of a ‘system-wide approach to meeting the needs of children, young people, and families’ and ‘working with other RAAs and adoption agencies in their region to identify and implement best practice’ (page 10)
- Despite the many millions invested in the RAA programme, LA spending on adoption has not decreased (page 14).

VAAAs have first-hand experience of the challenges brought by implementing the RAA programme, and these insights lead us to caution an evidenced based and thorough approach to rolling out RCCs, which would enable the sector to learn from and build upon past failures and successes. CVAA is not alone in this recommendation.

The Evidence Group supporting the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (IRCSC) has also urged government to interrogate the wider evidence base not reflected in the Review:

“The creation of Regional Adoption Agencies might be somewhat comparable, and the DfE-funded evaluation to date presents ‘a complicated picture’ with very mixed evidence of success against intended outcomes. Given the Review’s intention to strengthen leadership and accountability, care will need to be taken that these structural reforms do not dilute local accountability mechanisms. With ever-increasing pressure on the care system, it is unclear that the mechanisms proposed have the capacity to resolve the issues within the ‘market’, as it is often referred to. As with all structural change, and particularly in light of learning from NHS reorganisation, implementation of RCCs – if this idea is progressed – will need to ensure that this does not become an expensive distraction.”¹⁴

Likewise Children England¹⁵ has stated that there are many unaddressed questions regarding the RCC proposal such as the evidence base that it would necessarily improve commissioning, and whether actively intervening in the market structure solves the fundamental problem of market competition itself within children’s social care.

CVAA maintains that one of the most concerning consequences of the RAA programme has been the removal of adoption expertise from LA social work teams into RAAs, which may be a significant factor in why fewer children are having adoption chosen as their permanency plan. There is a serious risk of RCCs following the same route as RAAs, and therefore compounding the loss of valuable expertise from their care planning teams, without an explicit plan to avoid this happening.

We would urge the government’s response to detail exactly how the evidence base for RAAs is going to be factored into the implementation plan for RCCs, including details of any new analysis required prior to progressing the proposal. We also strongly recommend that consultation takes place with market experts and those with experience of this transition, including VAAAs, prior to progressing RCC plans.

¹⁴ <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/some-members-of-the-care-review-evidence-group-reflect-on-the-risks-of-reforming-in-haste-and-repenting-at-leisure/>

¹⁵ <https://www.childrenengland.org.uk/news/children-england-responds-to-the-final-report-of-the-care-review>