

CVAA response to DfE care review consultations

General feedback on the gov't's care review response '[Stable Homes, Built on Love](#)'

Consultation question 18: Overall, to what extent do you agree that the 6 key missions are the right ones to address the challenges in the system? **Neutral (neither agree nor disagree)**

We support Mission 1 which states that “by 2027, every care-experienced child and young person will feel they have strong, loving relationships in place.” However the government’s care review response does not contain the ambition nor the practical actions required to make this mission a reality. All adopted children are by definition care experienced and evidence continually stresses the need for these children’s relationships with their birth families and other significant people to be strengthened. Recent research on contact for children in care has also found that children are dissatisfied with how these relationships are handled ([Coram Voice and Rees Centre, University of Oxford, 2022](#)).

There are clear recommendations in research to invest in strengthening children’s relationships by supporting everyone involved – children and young people, birth families and adopters/carers. However there has been no commitment from central government to resource this. The care review’s final report called for a reshaping of the system to “put relationships front and centre” yet the government’s response relegated discussion of children’s relationships to its appendix. It concluded that nothing more was needed beyond what is already in train, and specifically the on-going pilot which digitalises letterbox contact for adopted children (Letterswap) which ends soon with no national funding committed to it continuing.

The 6 key missions need to be more than just empty words on a page. They need national strategy behind them and proper resourcing otherwise they will not change anything for children.

Consultation question 21: What support is needed to set up and make a success of Regional Care Cooperatives?

We would recommend that the Department do the following with regard to implementing Regional Care Cooperatives:

1. Conduct verbal consultations with voluntary adoption agency leaders to learn from their experiences of regionalisation in adoption, anticipate issues with RCCs based on challenges which arose during RAA implementation, and consider how best they can be avoided/overcome.
2. Conduct a thorough risk/benefit analysis to fully understand whether the benefits of implementing RCCs will be worth the costs, financially and in terms of disruption and timeliness.

As CVAA has [previously outlined](#), VAAs have first-hand experience of regionalisation which they should have the opportunity to share with the Department, for the benefit of children and families. They can advise on both the benefits and the drawbacks of regionalising children’s services.

It must be recognised that the RAA programme was not without its flaws; the most recent evaluation of the RAA programme found that:

- Waiting times for children increased rather than decreased
- There has been no substantial change in the diversity of adopters recruited
- Adopter ratings of adoption support services did not improve with the establishment of RAAs.¹
- In the 6 year timescale analysed, there have been no improvements in timeliness and efficiency consistently recorded
- Despite the many millions invested in the RAA programme, LA spending on adoption has not decreased.

In addition the implementation took no account of the impact on the wider “marketplace” for both placements and adoption support, having adverse effects on both due to lack of rigorous analysis and forward planning. With proper consultation, there is potential to bring better outcomes for children, families and the system. However the RCC model needs to be realistic and entirely focused on how it will enhance the lives of children rather than simply dealing with provider/commissioning issues. VAAs can help guide on this approach.

Consultation question 22 Do you have any additional suggestions on improving planning, commissioning and boosting the available number of places to live for children in care?

Yes - it is vital that adoption continues to be recognised and supported by government as a valuable permanence option for children. There has been a sharp decline in adoption numbers in recent years and this needs greater attention from government. Adoption is for the few, not the many, but for a small number of children it offers a lifelong loving and stable home which other forms of care cannot replicate.

Based on [recent analysis](#) into the social value of adoption, we urge central and local governments to better incorporate research into children’s outcomes into planning and commissioning decisions. The same outcomes need to be measured for children in all forms of long term care – foster care, kinship care and adoption – in order to make confident care planning decisions in children’s best interests. There need to be better mechanisms for feeding back evidence into decision-making among social workers and judges.

Regarding commissioning placements within adoption specifically, there are many improvements that could be made by central and local governments. Chief among these are:

- Developing clearer systems for signoff on interagency fee budgets. Some RAAs do not have control of their own budgets which leads to a time-consuming and ineffective process for securing this funding
- Greater consistency nationally on when external adoption placements should be sought from VAAs and defined timescales around this – e.g. priority children should be placed on Linkmaker within 6 weeks of the ADM decision of adoption

¹ [Supporting adoptive families the views of adoptive parents in 4 regional adoption agencies \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

- Investment should be made available to assist RAAs and LAs to fully understand their internal costs of delivering an adoption service, to enable them to make informed comparisons with external costs. Currently RAAs/LAs are underestimating their own internal unit costs and failing to factor in wider organisational costs such as office running costs, Ofsted regulation costs and back-office costs (admin, HR etc.) which leads to ill-informed commissioning decisions, based on misconceived views that external services are more expensive. This exercise would also help RAAs/LAs benchmark against each other and lead to greater consistency across the country.

Children's social care national framework and dashboard

To what extent do you agree that the National Framework is clear and easy to understand?

Strongly disagree

What do you think of the expectations for practice described in the National Framework?

Voluntary adoption agencies are extremely concerned about the expectations outlined in the National Framework as they grossly oversimplify the issues being addressed. The one-sentence expectations do not acknowledge the complexity of the themes they relate to, nor do they provide any context as to why the expectations have not been achieved to date. Often the expectations are strikingly obvious, yet have not been achieved for a catalogue of reasons, each of which deserves individual scrutiny to unpick and resolve. The lack of detail renders the National Framework meaningless. It does not equip leaders with any guidance on how they should best tackle the entrenched challenges which stand in the way of achieving the expectations. It does not differentiate between different leaders in the system who have different powers to deliver on these expectations. And it does not look at the role of central government in enabling and empowering leaders to fulfil these expectations.

Take for example the following expectation: "Leaders direct services so that where adoption is the right permanence option, children are found permanent loving families as quickly as possible." It centres around a flawed assumption that leaders know when adoption is the right permanence option for children. One of the greatest challenges in adoption currently is the fact that decisions about children's futures are being made without sufficient knowledge of the evidence base on children's outcomes. Likewise the focus on speed in this expectation rather than the quality of the match is something to question.

The expectation also fails to consider the barriers which cause delays for children with a plan of adoption. These include decreasing interagency budgets within local authorities, convoluted processes around how budgets are controlled and managed, financial pressures on local authorities to place children 'in-house' rather than externally, reductions in financial support from LAs for those adopting children with special needs, the absence of any requirements on RAAs/LAs to add children to Linkmaker within certain timescales, and various problems with adoption support which can disincentive people – especially those from particular backgrounds – from applying to adopt. The lack of consideration given to each of these issues is an oversight.

How could the National Framework strengthen the expectations for multi-agency working?

The Framework needs to be far more specific to achieve change in all respects, including improving multi-agency working. It needs to outline exactly how specific agencies should work with other specific agencies, in specific areas. For expectations relating to adoption, it should state what the different responsibilities are for RAA leaders and VAA leaders, as well as Directors of Children's Services, leaders at CAFCASS and leaders within the Courts.

How often should data be published to support learning and understand how practice is making a difference to children, young people and families? Quarterly

Outcome 4: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes. Please describe your views and limit your response to 200 words.

Our position is that the expectation "Leaders direct services so that where adoption is the right permanence option, children are found permanent loving families as quickly as possible" is insufficient. There should be explicit reference to leaders first investigating whether their workforce has a solid understanding of the benefits and limitations of each permanency option, and the latest research on children's outcomes. There should be a detailed analysis of all the factors contributing to delay for children and specific actions/targets outlined for different system leaders on how to resolve these.

The expectation "Leaders actively remove barriers to children being adopted, including addressing unnecessary bureaucracy and ensuring adopters are recruited from a diverse range of backgrounds" is also insufficient. Again, it needs to address the barriers and unhelpful bureaucratic progresses individually. Within this it must consider recruitment barriers such as access to support (including financial support) for adopters, as well as problems with the ASF application process, especially delays. It must highlight the responsibilities of the judiciary as opposed to children's services and adoption agencies in reducing bureaucracy.

The expectation "Practitioners provide support to foster carers and adopters, to help children and young people to maintain relationships with family and their networks" must include how this ambition will be resourced. This is already an ambition for most practitioners; the barrier is lack of investment, in both preparing all adopters and carers to manage this and in providing on-going support to them, their children and wider birth family members to ensure this is a positive experience.

Likewise the expectation "Practitioners support adopted children to bond with their adopted parents from the first time they meet and get the support they need, when they need it" must explore and resolve the insufficiency of available support to adoptive families. We urge government to commit to funding early help packages for adopters here, which could be accompanied by an expectation on services to deliver them.

Would you recommend any other existing indicators or evidence to support learning around this outcome?

Yes. Currently the Dashboard gives no indication of the metrics which accompany the expectations relating to adoption. It only states that "We will also develop indicators to align with the adoption strategy". This leaves us with no way of knowing whether the adoption metrics will be useful or effective. We would urge the Department to establish metrics which are as specific as possible relating to adoption.

It is vital that the same metrics on children's outcomes are collected across all forms of care. For example, the following are listed as proposed indicators for children in care and care leavers: stability of placements, SDQ scores, Key Stage attainment scores, % NEET, and % in higher education. These metrics also need collecting for children in adoptive and kinship placements. This is the only way that we can get closer to knowing which care pathways are best for which children.

There should also be indicators linking the support received by children with a host of outcomes.

Examples of indicators on support received:

Children in receipt of early support packages / specific therapeutic interventions / the level of support received (low level vs. high level support) / support with contact and maintaining birth family relationships / children who did not receive any support

Examples of children's outcomes to correlate with:

Academic attainment, adult employment, health/social outcomes such as adult homelessness, incarceration, psychiatric intervention. Childhood outcomes could include ACE scores and placement disruptions.

There should also be indicators relating to timeliness such as the age at which children received their package of support, and how long they waited for support, correlated with outcomes.

We strongly suggest indicators relating to the adoption process such as the time taken for a child's profile to be made visible to external agencies and the time it takes for them to be matched.

Proposals for the [child and family social worker workforce](#)

Note: CVAA will not be responding to the majority of questions this consultation. The questions go into detail about each proposal including price caps, post qualified experience, project teams, data and monitoring etc. CVAA will give neutral 'don't know' responses for most answers and make general comments in the free text box at the end.

19. Do you agree that these are the right data to monitor the impacts of the national rules on child and family social workers and to support workforce planning?

Data and monitoring must include children's outcomes as well as administrative data on jobs, pay, staffing, vacancies etc. This should be the key marker of success when it comes to implantation of the proposals.

Please provide any further comments on these proposals, including particular challenges and opportunities arising from the proposed national rules.

CVAA broadly supports the workforce proposals if they contribute to greater stability in the local authority social worker workforce. Voluntary adoption agencies and the children and families they serve are frequently negatively impacted by LA workforce capacity, churn and lack of expertise. This can create delays in children being matched, delays in adoption support assessments and applications being submitted, and lead to poor care planning for children's futures.

Yet it is important that these proposals are implemented hand in hand with the wider proposals in 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' which tackle social worker sufficiency, especially those relating to

making workers feel valued and supported, and improving job satisfaction and wellbeing. Staff retention is an issue across the entire children's sector and not just at a local authority level, so while tackling LA commissioning of agency social workers is important it should not get attention above and beyond the wider workforce proposals which are essential for the long term delivery of effective social work.

Lastly, we recommend that a clearer definition is established as to what constitutes a social work agency. This definition should exempt certain organisations (such as voluntary adoption agencies) from helping LAs with their capacity through offering short-term social worker resource. This avenue should be kept open because there is potential to ease LA capacity challenges without the problems connected with commissioning agency workers. It is not common practice but has the potential to be a workable solution with benefits for both the statutory and voluntary sectors.