

State of the VAA Sector

Summer 2023

1. Headline messages

Earlier this year, Maggie and Alice spoke with all CVAA members. As with previous years, Members were asked about recruitment; linking, matching and partnership working; finances and operations; equality, diversity, and inclusion; adoption support and contact; and incorporating the views of those with lived experience. CVAA gathers this information from members 1-2 times per year to ensure that we are aware of the issues that VAAs are facing and can then incorporate the themes of these responses into our support for members. We also look to share this information across the membership and with wider stakeholders to provide them with insights into the state of the VAA sector.

1.1. Recruitment

- Only 8 agencies reported that they met their placement target last year and a number reported that placement numbers were some way below the target that had been set. Many agencies stated they had lowered their targets for this year (as they had also done in 2021/22) and would also be lowering the number of adopters they look to recruit as a result.
- Finding adopters for sibling groups, older children and children with disabilities/complex health conditions remains a particular priority for VAAs. A number of members stated that they were being stricter about not encouraging applications from adopters with an interest in younger children. Many also stated that they were being very open and honest up front about the focus of their agency on harder to place children, including signposting prospective adopters to RAAs if they were looking for a baby or young child.
- A number of agencies were not concerned about the number of enquiries from adopters, but instead were focused on converting the right people and addressing delays in the approvals process, such as medical checks. This was the same as in the previous year's calls however, this year some agencies did report a notable drop in enquiries, so the picture in 2023 is a little more mixed.
- Many agencies (14) stated that the cost-of-living crisis has had an impact on adopter recruitment and noted issues including the inability for people to commit to taking a prolonged period off work to care for a new child.
- The majority of agencies stated that waiting times for adopters remained long, and this was particularly the case for single adopters, non-white British adopters and those who are more specific about the type of child they are open to.

- Most agencies had noted a drop in EPP placements due to RAAs taking these back in house, although a number were pushing for more EPPs particularly for older children. Some VAAs were also more optimistic about there being more EPP opportunities in the future.

1.2. Partnership working

- Quite a number of VAAs (9) stated that relationships with RAAs/LAs had improved with a further 3 responding that they had either improved or stayed the same. Only one agency reported that their relationships had worsened.
- Many VAAs did however note challenges with linking and matching, with some stating there had been an increase in competitive matching. Many also stated that they felt that RAAs/LAs would go with their own adopter/s even where a VAA approved couple or single adopter appeared to be the stronger match.

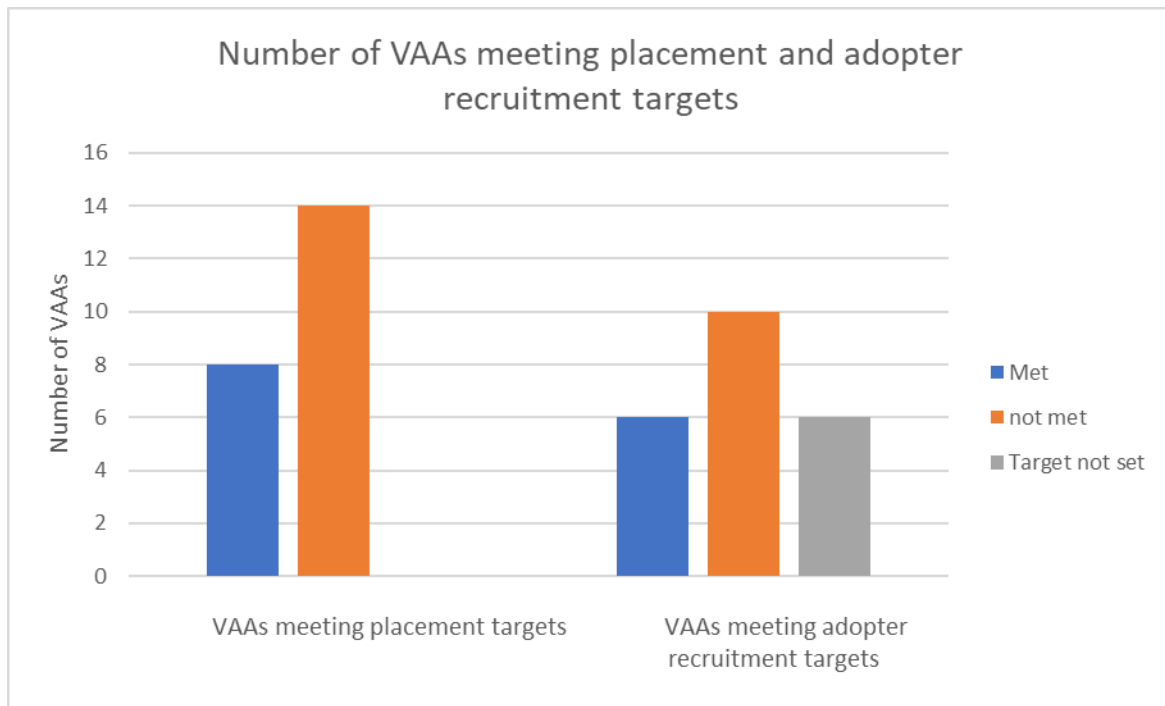
1.3. Finance and operations

- 10 agencies stated that they were in a good or ok financial position, however a further 10 reported their financial position as not being good so the picture was very mixed overall. Those in a more negative position cited taking cost saving measures including closing offices and not replacing staff who had left.
- Only 6 VAAs stated that they had diversified their services in the past year including through moving into the fostering and kinship care sectors, with the remaining 16 VAAs reporting that their focus had remained the same.
- For most VAAs staff number remained stable (8) or had reduced (often only slightly) due to high turnover or going through a merger or restructure.
- Half (11) of agencies had increased the recruitment of BAME staff and panel members although the other half of VAAs had seen a decrease this year.

1.4. Adoption support and contact

- Only 3 agencies have added support services over the past year although many VAAs noted that their offer to families has changed or expanded including things like providing more support groups and looking at different activity days for children. No agencies reported closing services.
- All VAAs are explicitly preparing adopters to maintain relationships with children's birth families during preparation training, with a growing focus on the benefits of open adoption and direct contact with birth families. A number of agencies noted the continuing challenge around this happening in practice including some continuing reluctance within LA/RAAs and a lack of funding to support contact arrangements.
- Many agencies noted ongoing challenges with accessing the Adoption Support Fund and a number reported not using it much as a result. Experiencing delays was commonplace and VAAs noted the need for adopters to be supported to access funds given the level of bureaucracy involved.

2. Recruitment



Only 8 agencies reported that they had met their placement targets for the year due to either delays or a lack of children in the system. For some members, this meant their services were running at a deficit.

A number of VAAs (10) also reported missing adopter recruitment targets although it was noted that for some agencies this was down to being clearer about the types of children waiting for families. Quite a few agencies also stated that they did not set targets for adopter recruitment, focusing more on converting the right adopters.

2.2. Cost of living impact

Many agencies (14) stated that the cost-of-living crisis has had an impact on adopter recruitment. Key issues that were highlighted included:

- The inability for people to commit to taking a prolonged period off work to care for a new child/children
- Concerns about job security and/or being able to survive on one wage
- Less interest in sibling groups because of additional costs
- Concerns about rising costs of mortgages, rent and bills impacting discretionary income and housing security

As a result, agencies are now thinking about how to support prospective adopters with some of these challenges, including signposting people to existing government support and being clear about

the financial support they could apply for as adopters. It was, however, acknowledged that the Cost-of-Living crisis is impacting individuals and families across the board so there is a limit to what agencies can do. Nonetheless it will be important to continue to monitor how it is impacting adopter recruitment in the coming months, and what this means for the types of children waiting.

2.3. Adoption waiting times

The majority of agencies stated that waiting times for adopters remained long, and this was particularly the case for single adopters, non-white British adopters and those who are more specific about the type of child they are open to.

This was a similar picture to last year where most agencies also reported that waiting times were long for their adopters, and that this had only been increasing.

This year:

- One agency stated that 9/10 families are waiting over 2 years with single adopters waiting the longest.
- Delays to medicals and matching panels were both cited as drivers of waiting times, along with LA/RAAs taking longer before putting children on Linkmaker.
- Some agencies noted an increase in competitive matching with multiple families being put forward for one child causing further delays, and impacting placements with VAAs.
- Agencies also noted the impact of the faith and ethnicity of adopters as impacting waiting times.

As with previous years, agencies noted that long waiting periods were impacting on adopter motivation, morale and in some cases had seen people withdraw from the process although for most agencies this was rare.

To combat this, members are continuing to provide additional training and support to adopters who are waiting for long periods. Few agencies were optimistic about waiting times reducing significantly in the short to medium term meaning VAAs will need to continue to invest time and resources in keeping their prospective adopters motivated and supported.

2.4 Adopter characteristics and diversity

Similarly to the findings in the previous State of the Sector report, finding adopters for sibling groups, older children and children with disabilities/complex health conditions remains a particular priority for VAAs.

- A number of members stated that they were being stricter about not encouraging applications from adopters with an interest in younger children.
- Some agencies had put in place a minimum age, for example, 2 years old whilst others had been open about a focus on placing school aged children in all of their materials and open evenings to ensure they were being clear with prospective adopters.
- Many also stated that they were being very open and honest up front about the focus of their agency on harder to place children. This meant turning away people who they felt were

unable to take children with complex needs or siblings or signposting prospective adopters to RAAs if they were looking for a baby or young child.

For some agencies this meant less adopters were being assessed by their agency, but it was noted that this was not necessarily problematic given the limited number of children being placed, and the need to focus on converting the right people along with finding families for those who had already been approved for some time.

For other VAAs, however, they were beginning to be more proactive on recruitment given the lower number of enquiries they had been receiving and concerns about having sufficient families approved and prepared to provide homes to the type of children waiting.

These findings mirror feedback from the statutory sector whereby some agencies still have a surplus of adopters and others have concerns about sufficiency due to a drop in enquiries/approval assessment completions.

It is also important to note that that similar to previous years the main concern for agencies was the lower number of placements taking place rather than recruitment.

2.5. Recruitment of BAME adopters

- The majority of agencies reported that there had been no change or little change since last year in relation to recruiting BAME adopters, so it remains challenging.
- Some agencies had started or had plans to kick off campaigns to encourage more BAME adopters to come forwards which they hoped would make a difference.
- A number of VAAs noted that where they did have BAME adopters they were often waiting longer, particularly if they were mixed heritage because some social workers are looking for a perfect racial match.

As a result, continued efforts will be needed from VAAs in the coming year to shift the dial on the number of BAME adopters in the voluntary sector.

2.6 recruitment of adopters for EPP

- Most agencies had noted a drop in EPP placements due to RAAs taking these back in house. VAAs felt that this was often driven by not wanting to pay for concurrency or a perception that they shouldn't be using a VAA to place an easy baby/young child. It was also noted that where EPPs were happening there were too often delays which were undermining the point of the EPP placement.
- Despite the challenges a number were pushing for more EPPs, particularly for older children. There were also examples of VAAs exploring partnerships with their RAAs on EPP although these were limited.
- This builds on the picture last year where some agencies had begun efforts to boost recruitment of EP adopters.
- Some VAAs were also more optimistic about there being more EPP opportunities in the future with agencies stating that in their areas they had noticed more interest in EPP for sibling groups and older children. A few agencies also stated that they were dual approving

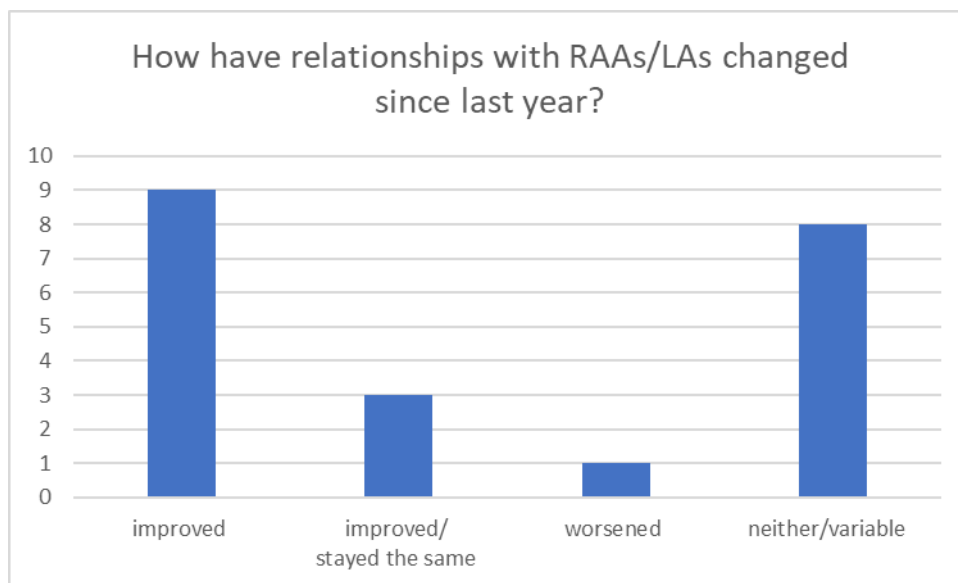
all of their adopters so they were at least able to take advantage of EPP opportunities if they arose and were an appropriate match.

The possibility of more EP opportunities for older children and/or sibling groups has the potential to be more attractive to VAAs as it avoids them being left with adopters on their books who are wanting a baby, however these opportunities are still relatively small in number.

Partnership working

3.1. Relationships with RAAs/VAs

Almost half of VAAs (9) stated that relationships with RAAs/LAs had improved over the last year with a further 3 responding that they had either improved or stayed the same. Only one agency reported that their relationships had worsened.



We heard positive examples of collaboration and improved communication. This included increased discussion about support services, working together on national initiatives and potential links, and matches being flagged earlier in some areas. Agencies also noted that where collaborative leaders and/or managers were in place this made a real difference and had driven improvements.

However, there were a number of challenges to better partnership working highlighted by a number of agencies:

- Significant variation across the country driven by individual attitudes to VAAs creating challenges for agencies working across multiple areas
- Increased demand for information and within short time scales
- Evidence of RAAs going to other RAAs rather than engaging the VAA sector because of the fee
- A sense that RAAs saw regular meetings with VAA partners as ticking a box rather than an opportunity for real partnership.

Overall, much of the feedback mirrored the messaging last year that whilst relationships were positive or had improved, there are still issues around how this translates into practice, and even more so into placements.

VAAAs also highlighted that they were aware of the challenges facing social workers in terms of workload and that this was potentially impacting their ability to collaborate, including reducing their attendance at key cross-sector forums. Without their attendance these forums were understandably seen as having little usefulness for VAA teams.

Agencies would welcome further improvements to partnership working over the coming year, with a particular focus on ensuring that better dialogue with RAA partners leads to VAAAs being considered earlier for appropriate matches. VAAAs acknowledged that there are continuing financial barriers to this in practice however including most notably the interagency fee.

3.2. Challenges with linking and matching

Many VAAAs noted challenges with linking and matching with some stating there had been an increase in competitive matching and more focus on RAAs doing everything they could to use their own adopters. Many stated that they felt that RAAs/LAs would go with their own adopters even where a VAA approved couple or single adopter appeared to be the stronger match which was consistent with the concerns raised by VAAAs last year. This has continued to lead to fewer children being placed through VAAAs.

VAAAs were also concerned about:

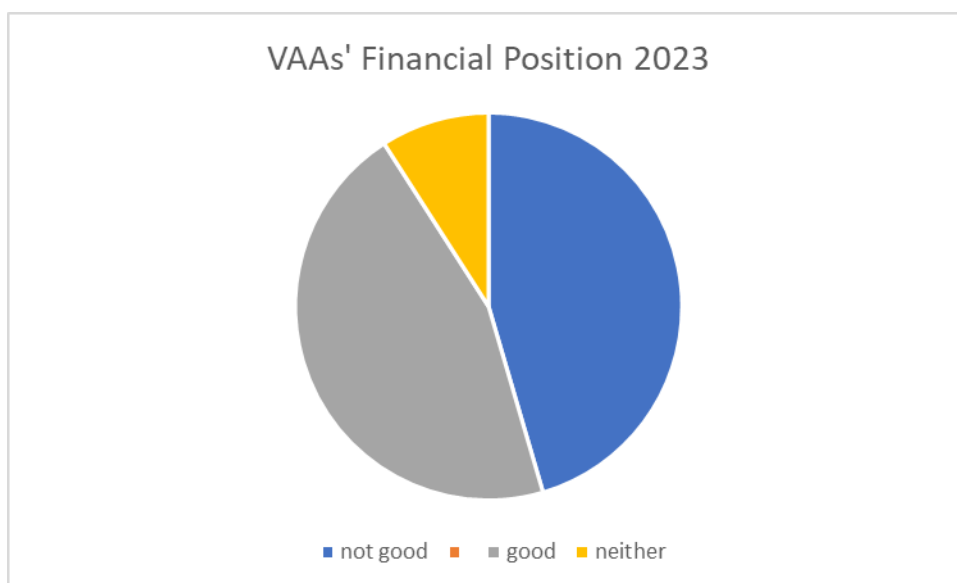
- Lower availability of children for those going through a VAA
- Competitive matching placing a strain on adopters and slowing down the process
- Sequential planning meaning children are spending longer in care before being seen by VAA adopters
- Reduced quality of matches to keep them in house
- General delays between linking, family visits and then progression to matching panel
- RAAs not getting back to VAA adopters which combined with multiple rejections is very demoralising
- Impact of high turnover within RAAs which slowed down progress on matches and also meant VAAAs had to keep investing in building new relationships.
- Children suddenly not being available on Linkmaker with no explanation as to why when expression of interest has been placed. Agencies also noted that some profiles are hidden to VAAAs
- Not being present at the right forums where linking and matching decisions are being made
- Additional information requirements being put on VAA adopters with no clear rationale

Whilst challenging some agencies had taken steps to try and encourage more matches to be made. This included investing time in building relationship with key social workers within their local RAAs, trying to demonstrate that early engagement with VAAs is preferable to being inundated with Linkmaker requests and doing videos for their adopters to try and raise their profile.

VAAs would welcome further steps to make the children who are waiting for a family more visible to their adopters, and in some areas there was clear frustration that RAAs were concerned about sufficiency when VAAs had suitable adopters prepped and approved who were not being used.

3. Finances and operations

4.1. VAA financial position



- Around half of agencies stated that they were in a good or ok financial position which exactly matched the position of VAAs in 2021/2022, however the same amount (10) reported their financial position as not being good.
- Those who were struggling cited taking cost saving measures including closing offices and not replacing staff who had left. Some VAAs also noted that they continued to keep under review each month the need for redundancies or shutting down particular services.
- Many VAAs in a less strong financial position stated this had been driven by lower placement numbers, and some agencies also highlighted the impact of a tough fundraising environment, the fragility of other funding streams and the impact of the cost of living crisis.
- For agencies that were in a good financial position this was in part due to generating income from revenue streams outside of placement fees. For example, some noted increased interest in life story work and adoption support services which had helped fill the gap created by less children being placed.

.4.2. Diversification

Only 6 VAAs stated that they had taken action to diversify their services in the last year including within the fostering and kinship care sectors. The remaining 16 VAAs reported that their focus remained the same, including some agencies who stated they were committing all their resources to ensuring their adoption service continued to be robust.

VAAs who had explored diversification stated that this had occurred in the following areas:

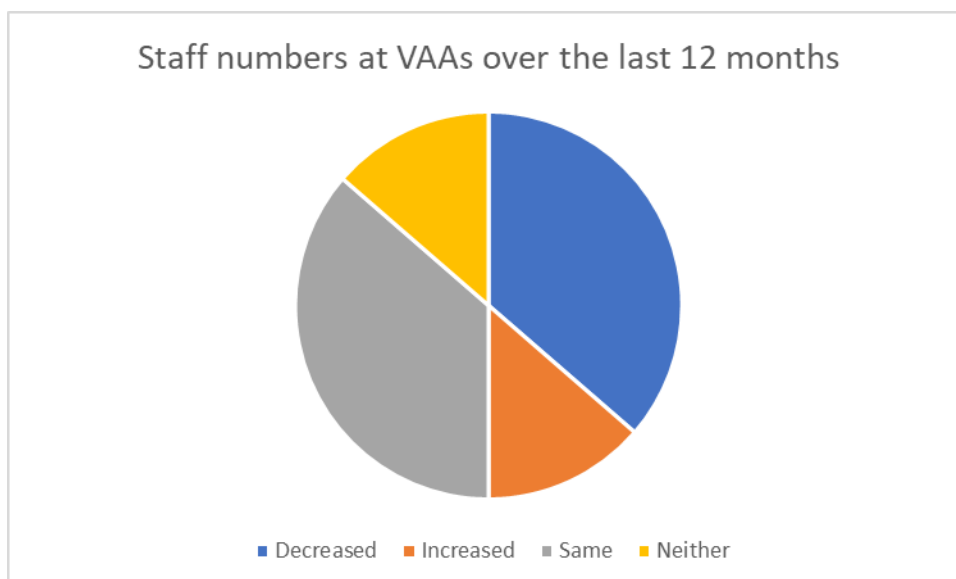
- The provision of fostering services
- Kinship care support and support for special guardians
- Assessments for step parents looking to adopt
- Intercountry assessments
- Foster to adopt/EP in other nations outside of England
- Training adopters who are waiting, particularly when they are looking at children with very complex needs
- Services for school training and support
- Life story work support and provision
- Birth family support

Members who were taking steps to diversify did note the challenges associated with this. This included recruiting the right workforce, particularly those who were moving into the fostering sector, and the uncertainty and short-term nature of funding for support services, along with issues with funds coming from the Adoption Support Fund.

Similarly, to last year VAAs also noted the impact of the difficult economic climate including how it was affecting fundraising and the ability for public sector organisations to invest in training. This reduced their ability to generate revenue from avenues outside of placement fees which have also been falling.

4.4. Workforce

Staffing



- For most almost half of VAAs staff number remained stable (8). Of the others, 8 had seen a reduction and only 3 VAAs had increased their staff numbers in the last year. This means slightly fewer (8 rather than 11) VAAs have seen a reduction in staff compared to last year.
- Agencies cited staff leaving and not being replaced due to financial concerns, along with mergers and restructures as key drivers for lower staff numbers. A number of VAAs stated they had also seen high turnover in the last year which had had an impact, and it was also noted that in some cases roles were not being covered during parental leave to cut costs.
- Some agencies noted that although their overall staffing number had remained stable, they had seen a shift in the type of staff or what they were working on. For example, more staff being deployed on adoption support or fostering rather than working on securing placements for their adopters.

The overall workforce picture means that many VAAs are delivering services and placements with less resources which some agencies reported had impacted staff morale. Positively, turnover remains much lower than in RAAs although this brings its own challenges for VAAs who are trying to build relationships with statutory partners.

4.5. Equality and diversity

Half (11) of agencies had increased the recruitment of BAME staff and panel members although the other half of VAAs had seen a decrease this year.

VAAs identified a number of strategies being used to improve equality and diversity in their workplaces and practice, including:

- Working on recruitment messaging to try and attract more BAME staff
- Ensuring that adverts contain staff from those backgrounds and are generally more representative of a diverse workforce and sector
- Introducing recruitment systems which doesn't disclose personal details and doing more staff training to tackle unconscious bias
- Adding new events for staff including Eid and Divali to be more inclusive

There was acknowledgement from some agencies that they need to do more on this and that there was still some way to go to ensure their workforce and panels were more representative. A number of these initiatives are also not new having been introduced or highlighted in previous years and this highlights the ongoing need for action to boost diversity.

Positively there were also some VAAs who had also made progress on recruiting LGBTQ+ and disabled individuals which was raised last year as an area requiring action.

Adoption support and contact

Only 3 agencies have added support services over the past year (which was 2 less than in 2021/22) although many VAAs noted that their offer to families has changed or expanded. This included the addition of new things like providing more support groups and looking at different activity days for children. No agencies reported closing services.

All VAAs are explicitly preparing adopters to maintain relationships with children’s birth families during preparation training, with a growing focus on the benefits of open adoption and direct contact with birth families. A number of agencies noted the continuing challenge around this happening in practice including some continuing reluctance within LA/RAAs and a lack of funding to support contact arrangements. This was a source of frustration for some agencies who recognise the benefits of more contact and who were seeing adopters more open and more prepared for direct contact.

Ongoing challenges were also identified in relation to accessing the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) which are explored more below.

5.1. Adoption Support Fund (England only)

Many agencies noted ongoing challenges with accessing the ASF and a number reported not using it much as a result. Experiencing delays was commonplace as was reported in previous years and VAAs noted the need for adopters to be supported to access funds given the level of bureaucracy involved.

Some of the key challenges highlighted included:

- Issues within families deteriorating during the time it takes to access the funds
- Frustration that VAAs remain unable to make applications directly to the ASF
- Issues with changes to travel payments which can mean services are delivered at a loss or near loss
- The cap for families is problematic, particularly for those with complex needs
- Overall bureaucracy of the process and the use of preferred provider lists continues to be a problem.

Whilst the majority of VAAs reported these types of issues, it is important to note that some agencies did say they felt the ASF had become easier to access and that delays had reduced.

As a result, VAAs were keen to see a continued push to reform how the fund was accessed and by whom, along with tackling the uncertainty about the fund’s future past 2025.

Despite its challenges, most agencies were very keen to see the continuation of the ASF given the positive impact it has for families who are able to access the fund and this will be a key ask from CVAA for the next government.

5.2. Contact

Similarly to last year, all VAAs are actively taking steps to improve contact arrangement for adopted children to help them maintain links with their birth families. Examples of action being taken included:

- Explicitly preparing adopters to maintain relationships with children’s birth families during preparation training, with a growing focus on the benefits of open adoption and direct contact with birth families. This includes agencies having birth parents at training sessions or having siblings discussing the benefits of contact.

- Providing adopters with positive examples of contact during their assessment, including trying to involve people with lived experience.
- Helping support the delivery of contact post-placement, including supporting with contact with siblings, grandparents and foster carers.
- Supporting adult adoptees with accessing their records and reunification.
- Providing contact training to panel members and with the team at the organisation to show benefits of contact if it's delivered properly.
- Some agencies stated that they had set an expectation of direct contact in every placement, although this was not the case across the piece.

A number of agencies noted the continuing challenge around this happening in practice including some continuing reluctance within some LA/RAAs. The lack of funding to support contact arrangements was also raised as an issue, particularly where it involved expensive travel arrangements or where overnight stays may be required. It was noted that sometimes direct contact is being written into plans with no thought about how it will be supported. This also included having enough staff to support and supervise contacts.

Some VAAs also highlighted that they had been working with the judiciary to highlight the progress being made about a contact, as part of wide discussions about the continuing value of adoption as a form of permanence.

It was noted that agencies want to ensure the push for increased contact is managed safely and appropriately, particularly in the early days. This requires adequate resourcing and planning and whilst VAAs were committed to doing this it was challenging in the current financial environment.

4. CVAA's work

In last year's report, CVAA members asked CVAA to take action or do further work in the following areas. The progress and activities that have been undertaken have been added in italics.

- Continued efforts to make CVAA genuinely UK-centric, including highlighting and isolating England only updates that are sent to all members
- Continued advocacy on the interagency fee, the ASF and the level playing field.
- Help unpicking where who children are who would previously been adopted and why adoption has not been chosen for them.
- Exploring data on reversals and understanding what is meant by certain terms in the data such as 'placement not found'.
- Exploring whether numbers of relinquished babies are increasing and if so why.
- A CVAA campaign on the an interagency fee for complex children.
- Running smaller groups to look at particular projects such as caseloads and productivity.
- Work to foster more inspirational debate in leaders' forums.

Areas of focus for 2023/24

We also asked VAAs for feedback about CVAA; what they find useful and what further help we could offer. Agencies were very positive about the role that CVAA plays in getting the voice of the voluntary adoption sector heard at the top table along with the practical insights and training it provides through the practice programme.

A number of agencies noted that the communication was members was really good when it came to sharing insights, although a few noted that more could be done to share the CVAA's impact or work behind the scenes.

Members also highlighted that it was a crucial period for the organisation with a number of staff changes, so it is important to ensure the good work that has been happening isn't lost during this.

The question was also posed around whether CVAA is being challenging enough about the state of adoption, or whether it could go further in its narrative and asks of government.

- Promoting adoptions and removing barriers to more VAA placements including current perceptions of geography and the issues with the interagency fee

- Gathering more data on what is happening with contact to help provide the sector with a better picture of this.
- Continued work on the ASF including pushing for more funding to be available for early intervention
- Making sure the SROI report is used to debunk myths with the judiciary who are a key blocker to more adoptions being made and using broadcast media more to raise profile and benefits of adoption
- Providing more support on Trans adoption applicant potentially through training as part of the practice programme
- More help sharing policies and practices so that each agency isn't having to invest time and resources into creating their own versions
- Support with training around foster care as more agencies move into this space

CVAA is incredibly grateful to members giving us their time and sharing this feedback and these ideas. The insights you have shared are vital to our ongoing policy and advocacy work, and we hope will also help shape our ongoing conversations with members about VAA sustainability and diversification. We recognise that VAAs continues to operate within an incredibly challenging operating environment and will continue to do all we can to support members; including highlighting the impact of lower placement numbers on the sustainability of the sector to key government stakeholders.

We will ensure that all of your suggestions are fed into not just the development of the new CVAA strategy, but our workplan for the rest of this year including the creation of a CVAA manifesto ahead of next year's General Election.