



## **CVAA Response on behalf of Voluntary Adoption Agencies in England & Wales to the Public Law Working Group Draft Report on Adoption**

CVAA is the membership body for voluntary adoption agencies across the UK. The voluntary adoption sector came together to form CVAA in 1992, in order to strengthen agencies' collective voice. For 30 years we have supported member agencies, advocated on their behalf and provided a forum for networking, practice-sharing and collaboration. Our vision is for adopted children, young people and adults to lead happy fulfilling lives in loving families supported by a strong voluntary adoption sector.

CVAA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Public Law Working Group's draft report on adoption and does so after extensive consultation with our members. Whilst this report represents views from across our membership, it should be noted that Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) in Wales have rightly also fed in their views to the National Adoption Service who will submit a separate response.

Adoption is about children being raised safely in families when they cannot be cared for by their own parents or relatives. However, we know from experience that when, already vulnerable, children enter the care system and do not have the best experience possible, the negative impact is not just on their lives but on society more broadly. Whilst it will, and should, always be for the few and not the many, adoption – as this report acknowledges – continues to provide some of the most vulnerable children in our society with permanence and stability, enabling them to have much better life outcomes, such as improved employment opportunities and reduced interaction with the criminal justice system. In fact, as laid out in research commissioned by CVAA last year, adoption yields at least £1.3m in net benefits to a child or young person, their families, and other key stakeholders in society<sup>1</sup>.

The adoption sector is focussed on modernising, and CVAA and its members recognise and support the need for adoption to change. It is positive therefore to see this report provide recommendations which will not only speed up judicial processes to give greater certainty to children and their families, but that can help support adoptees with their identity needs both as children and into adulthood. This would also be in line with where the global conversation on adoption is heading on such matters.

Whilst many of the recommendations focus on changes to policy or process, along with some changes to the law, it cannot be ignored that such a seismic shift in adoption as a concept and practice, particularly in relation to how adopted children's relationships are managed, will require significant investment.

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<sup>1</sup> Extrapolating this value to the total number of children adopted in 2021 yields a total value to society of at least £4,210.2m. This value represents the gain to society from children and young people living with adoptive parents, as opposed to being placed in an alternative form of permanence, such as long term foster care, residential care or in SGOs. <https://cvaa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CVAA-The-value-of-adoption-report-final-Nov-22.pdf>

Historically, the experiences of our members have been that children placed with adopters we have assessed, often have patchy or little support when it comes to maintaining any kind of contact and we also know from looking at the experiences of the fostering and kinship sectors that unsupported contact can do more harm than good.

Contact of course, is an important aspect of children developing a full sense of who they are. Fundamentally overhauling the current system for maintaining children's relationships will therefore inevitably mean that the sector will need additional resources to support ongoing training and shifting long-standing cultural attitudes within the social work and legal professions. It will also mean that the recommendations must be implemented hand-in-hand with a programme of education and change management across all parts of the adoption system, which genuinely recognises the significant time and resources that need to be given to this type of very sensitive and specialist work.

Against the backdrop of social worker shortages, we also believe that VAAs have an important role in driving these changes to practice. We continue to consistently place around 19% of all children for adoption each year (in England) and each member agency has extensive experience, built up and nurtured over years, amongst its workforces. However, the potential role for VAAs should not just be continuing to support and prepare their families with a more open approach to adoption, but through also increasingly being a trusted and experienced partner who can be commissioned to deliver the higher levels of support services that implementing these recommendations in this report will require.

We also note that 80% of all children placed with VAA adopters are from priority groups and will include children from Global Majority backgrounds and disabled children. For these reasons all of our responses consider the associated cultural contexts, and we would always advocate that any services delivered on behalf of these children are mindful of these contexts too.

As our response lays out, VAAs welcome much of this draft report and are behind the overall vision for a more modern adoption system that it seeks to deliver. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the Public Law Working Group as they take this important work forward.

## Chapter One – Adoption and Contact

As the report recognises, in recent years, the case for children maintaining positive and meaningful, lasting relationships with the birth families they have been separated from, as well as other significant people in their early lives, has grown and strengthened. The latest studies<sup>2</sup> show that high-quality

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Beth Neil's work at University of East Anglia including Neil, E. (2009) 'Post-Adoption Contact and Openness in Adoptive Parents' Minds: Consequences for Children's Development', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 39:1. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/39/1/5/1715071>

Neil, E. (2010) 'The benefits and challenges of direct post-adoption contact: perspectives from adoptive parents and birth relatives', *Aloma*, 27, pp. 89-115. Available at: [https://contact.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Supporting\\_direct\\_contact\\_after\\_adoption\\_neil\\_aloma\\_2010.pdf](https://contact.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Supporting_direct_contact_after_adoption_neil_aloma_2010.pdf)

Neil, E., Beek, M., and Ward, E. (2013) 'Contact after adoption: a follow up in late adolescence', Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia. Available at: [https://www.uea.ac.uk/documents/96135/4796949/D3+Contact\\_report\\_NEIL\\_dec\\_20\\_v2\\_2013.pdf/4d454c4c-9d0e-d1fc-58f7-95adac1a7f12?t=1619533288211](https://www.uea.ac.uk/documents/96135/4796949/D3+Contact_report_NEIL_dec_20_v2_2013.pdf/4d454c4c-9d0e-d1fc-58f7-95adac1a7f12?t=1619533288211)

contact is closely linked with children's ability to make sense of their own personal stories and their emerging identities, and to develop a sense of understanding about who they are and what they have experienced.

Yet, it remains clear that practice is lagging far behind what the evidence is saying, despite the will from many families and practitioners to modernise and improve how children connect with their birth families and people who are important to them.

Because of these system failings, we know that it is also common now for older children to take matters into their own hands by seeking out direct contact themselves when they become a teenager. Around a quarter 13 to 18-year-olds had direct contact with a birth family member outside of any formal agreement in 2020, and half the time this contact was initiated without adoptive parents' involvement (Pause, 2021). Some of this is because it is becoming easier and easier to find birth family members online (particularly via social media), however it is also clear that these are indicators of a system which is not working well, and this underlines the need for urgent and radical change to ensure that adoption is fit for the needs of today's children.

It is welcome therefore that this report acknowledges the need for change and lays out a number of steps which can help to create a modern approach to maintaining children's relationships rightly built around their needs, rather than those of the systems or adults around them.

Overall, there is strong support from CVAA members for the recommendations laid out in this chapter and in particular, we welcome the proposals which focus on the following areas:

1. *Considering contact needs earlier in the process*

CVAA supports the view of the report that a child's contact needs should be considered earlier on in the process. VAAs report that too often key details or information is lost due to staff turnover or cases being handed over to new workers or teams, and this can mean key individuals can be overlooked later down the line. It is also CVAA members' view that not enough is done to archive materials from the birth and foster homes which can later be used for life story work and to help answer questions children may have. This should include both photos of rooms and key people, as well as videos if possible. VAAs noted that it can be common that only 'nice photos' are kept and shared and that these need to be more frequently combined with tougher images which age appropriately show the reality of the child's experience.

Whilst it is broader than the scope of this report, VAAs do feel strongly that earlier conversations about contact should form part of or a broader shift in which all children have a multi-disciplinary assessment of need pre-order. This would help ensure that plans to maintain key relationships for a child take into account their therapeutic needs as well as a detailed understanding of their early experiences, and that plans for contact are integrated with plans for ongoing support, including therapeutic life story work. The relevance here is that this model supports the position that contact is seen as an important part of a child's holistic needs rather than as a solution in and of itself to the multitude of challenges that adopted young people face.

We also hope that beginning plans for maintaining a child's relationships earlier in the process will give transparency to prospective adopters about the level of contact they will need to support from the outset, rather than this being discussed when they have already committed to one plan only to be faced with, what can feel like, major changes. This will enable an open conversation about any concerns they may have and the support that will need to be in place to help the child engage, whilst at the same time settling into their new home. It will also bring to life what the child's identity needs will mean for their adoptive family in practice, and the complexity of the feelings their child is likely to experience around contact, as opposed to just learning about hypothetical contact plans in preparation training.

It was noted, however, that this timing could also be challenging. At the point that a Placement Order is granted, the relationship between the placing authority and birth family members is often understandably fraught and adversarial. In practice, this can impact decisions about ongoing contact and the assessment of the challenges more contact may bring. Thought must therefore be given as to how to ensure that this time of conflict does not impact decisions about contact, including through managers and leaders within agencies having more oversight and input or potentially involving children's guardians. This should be combined with evidence based impactful support for birth families, which does already exist but is under-utilised and inconsistently provided across the country. This will be key to ensuring that decisions are more child-centred and not focused on appeasing the adults involved – either birth family members or social work professionals. Effective work with birth families to help and support them through this difficult life experience is essential if any contact plan is to work. VAAs are unconnected to care planning and already provide such services from a more neutral capacity and we believe such services should be extended and routinely available across England and Wales.

VAAs are also clear that whilst they support how children's relationships can be maintained this should not mean that a drawing up of a detailed plan occurs at this early stage of care planning; for example, determining the frequency or exact type of contact with each individual. Instead, some initial thought should be given as to who may be important for a child to maintain a relationship with and some of the key considerations which will need to be taken into account. We would hope that information gathered from Family Group Conferencing would inform such plans. The key principle here, based on real case experiences across the CVAA memberships, is that if contact is supported and in place from an early stage, it is much more likely to grow and thrive in frequency and quality in an organic way, like any relationship. Conversely, an overly complicated or prescriptive plan, with patchy support, is much more likely to fail and this gives the false impression that contact was always a bad idea to begin with.

It was felt by almost all members that judicial involvement in contact planning should be limited. Where contact plans do not seem appropriate and evidence is available to support this view, these should of course be challenged, but VAAs feel strongly that social workers working in partnership with families (birth and adoptive) is the way to create contact arrangements that work for those involved and that can be sustained over time in line with a child's needs. As much as VAAs wish to see improvements to contact generally, blanket approaches to plans would not work in our experience and we would also therefore be cautious about the use of templated contact plans as these may reduce flexibility for individual children.

As highlighted above, it is also critical that contact planning is considered in the context of a wider assessment of the child's needs. A multi-disciplinary support plan, focussed on holistic needs, would not only ensure that contact plans properly consider children's experiences, but ensure that there is also support post-placement, which can support a child to engage in contact in a more meaningful way as well as evaluate contact in real time and take responsibility for managing any changes.

*2. Taking a more tailored approach within which letterbox contact is not the default option.*

For too long letterbox contact has been the default children for the vast majority of adopted children regardless of the huge variation in their experiences and the differences in their identity needs.

In 2000, research found that the majority of adopted children (81%) relied on letterbox contact to connect with family members, most commonly with birth mothers and/or maternal grandparents (Neil and Thoburn, 2000). Direct contact was only happening for a minority of children, and this was usually with brothers and sisters. Fewer than 1 in 10 children (9%) had a plan for direct contact with a birth parent.

Over 20 years later, letterbox remains the plan for the vast majority of adopted children. Just this year Adoption UK's Adoption Barometer found that 98% of adoptive parents surveyed had at least one agreement formal agreements in place for indirect contact with their child or children's birth family members, whereas only 8% had direct contact plans in place with regards to their child's birth mother and just 5% for their child's birth father.

Our experience as VAAs has often been that resources to manage letterbox contact ebb and flow, and the lack of a central database often means that exchanges can be patchy, late or simply fizzle out. Even when correspondence is sent on time the delays to screen it and send it out have often meant key events like birthdays are missed. It is not always clear who in a Local Authority (LA) is responsible for managing and overseeing the system and for too long systems themselves were inadequate, and in some cases have not kept up with digital advances. Support for adopters to manage contact has also been lacking when a letterbox agreement is in place as it is assumed that the act of writing a letter is straightforward, but VAA social workers report that this is something they are routinely asked to help with, and often on an ongoing basis after an Adoption Order has been made.

Whilst letterbox may be appropriate in some cases, VAAs feel strongly that this should be a backup to a more open and more flexible approach to contact to ensure that decisions about the maintenance of children's relationships are truly centred around the needs of the child, rather than around system or managing risk. Letterbox plans can sometimes feel like the easy option to manage increased case complexity and workloads, and whilst the voluntary sector is acutely aware of resource issues in the statutory sector this approach does not deliver the right outcomes for children long term.

Any move away from letterbox contact as a default must also include rethinking on how sibling relationships are maintained. There are too many examples of children being separated and direct contact being limited or stopped without a long-term plan in place. The loss of sibling relationships due to being raised in different families is tragic, but for this to be compounded further by little or no contact is unacceptable. Many VAA social workers have cited examples, including recent cases, where

sibling contact was deemed unmanageable due to distance, the wishes of different care givers and the assumption that it would be too disruptive emotionally. The relationships of children being adopted with their brothers and sisters being raised elsewhere should be a top priority for contact. This includes with half-siblings whose relationships are often viewed as less important, or siblings who have not lived together.

Where possible, VAAs are already pushing for a more modern approach to contact, exploring how to support more meaningful contact for children where letterbox has been agreed by default. However, as VAAs are not the party responsible for children's care planning this can limit their ability to influence the level at which contact is set. Ensuring Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and LAs support the move away from letterbox by default is therefore a crucial part of the solution to achieve culture change. Many young people and adoptees who are now adults are involved in training and public speaking about the importance of contact and should be better used to educate the workforce involved in all stages of care planning. This can help support a move away from simply thinking about removing children from risk to thinking about their long-term relationship needs emerging from the loss they have lived through by being placed in care and an adoption plan being agreed.

As the drive towards openness in adoption moves forward, it should also not be forgotten that for a significant number of children, contact could be too risky and bring too great a risk of further physical or emotional harm. Not all parties who we would wish to be able to maintain a relationship with adopted children will be able to do so safely, whatever level of support and supervision is in place, as their own needs and emotional damage may be too great. This is simply a fact that we must accept as a sector.

As the report recognises the type of children coming to adoption has changed significantly over the years and this means that the majority of them have already suffered harm, abuse or neglect. Where relatives have abused a child, particular skill and effort is needed to actually determine if contact is in children's best interests, and often these assessments are not robust enough. Ensuring that flexibility is embedded within new approaches to take this into account and protect those children for whom contact presents a genuine risk to their safety will be key, and we cannot stress enough that this must be focussed on emotional harm, which is much more likely to be the issue.

The needs of birth family members and the expectations that are being placed upon them should also be taken into account, so that increased contact is positively experienced by all parties. This includes recognising that the time around the child being placed for adoption will understandably impact on birth family members ability to engage with contact as this is a time when emotions will be running high. It also includes recognising the culture, ethnicity and backgrounds of birth families so that practice is culturally competent. Again, no rigid template plan will work as every child and every family is different. Social workers must be supported to develop the skills to assess these situations and be supported and empowered to make informed recommendations.

Looking at experiences of contact in countries outside of England, for example Northern Ireland and the USA, where direct contact is already much more commonplace, also underlines the importance of adequate support being provided to birth families. Anecdotal evidence from CVAA members located in Northern Ireland shows that non-attendance of birth family members is a much more common cause of

contact stopping or breaking down, rather than a lack of willingness from adopters or the right policy framework to encourage contact. Academic articles looking at the Northern Irish experience of contact<sup>3</sup> have also identified a number of challenges that arise for birth family members as a result of greater openness in adoption as well as the known advantages.

This again underlines the need for the recommendations to be backed up by adequate support and it is welcome therefore that the report recommends a stronger focus on the support that is available for birth families. In addition to the points laid out in the report, CVAA believes that the Family Rights Group's current project mapping birth family support services will be useful resources for understanding the gap in support and the scale of investment required.

Our final point on this matter is that relationships ebb and flow and this means that the support on offer therefore needs to be lifelong rather than subject to arbitrary cut offs based on age. Adoptees often cite on social media that this is not recognised and as adults, they have nowhere to seek informed support on issues that impact their lives.

*3. The need to review and amend contact plans over time so that it recognises the changing needs of children as they grow.*

CVAA welcomes and agrees with the report's assessment that too often plans are set at the point of Placement Order and then not reviewed regardless of changes in a child's needs. Research from Pause (2021), for example, found that nearly three quarters of adoptive families and women working with the charity had never had their letterbox contact reviewed. We are aware that resources and lack of clarity of responsibility post adoption order or post the three-year statutory support period, can cause this to happen rather than lack of understanding or willingness, but this again points to a system like the one proposed by CVAA in our recent report *My People* being needed (See report attached with submission).

Feedback from VAAs consistently supports the view that contact is not reviewed, and many agencies stated that they were aware that LA and RAA teams supporting letterbox in their areas were overwhelmed with requests awaiting review. We would therefore welcome reforms which could ensure that contact plans were better supported and able to evolve in line with children's needs. Too often agencies see plans left untouched despite a clear need from the child, or evidence of significant positive change from birth family members which has notably reduced the potential challenges associated with increased/direct contact.

To support this (in addition to the wider programme of education which is explored more below), VAA members felt that Adoption England should consider introducing a new policy which requires children's contact plans to be reviewed by RAAs. The frequency of the reviews should be decided on a case-by-case basis taking into account the age and experiences of the child, but it is suggested that, as a minimum, an initial review should be conducted 18 months post-placement with a further review date set around 3 years. CVAA members recognised that this would create additional work for teams already

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<sup>3</sup> Turkington, S. and Taylor, B.J. (2009). Post-adoption Face-to-face Contact with Birth Parents: Prospective Adopters' available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575270802504289> and MacDonald, M. (2020). Supporting Face-to-Face Birth Family Contact after Adoption from Care: Learning for Trauma-Sensitive Practice. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa121>.

stretched and operating under differing models, but felt it was an important step to ensure that change is being delivered and sustained.

VAAAs also reported that many of their most successful examples of direct contact had occurred outside of the formal system and had developed organically by the birth family members and adopters, when opportunities to review plans were in place. This underlines the need to balance having processes, which encourage the maintenance of relationships with birth family members, with the flexibility to enable the parties involved to make decisions about the contact that is best for the child concerned. Regular reviews of contact plans would enable RAAAs to also have a better understanding of what contact is occurring and to identify and share good practice when it is identified.

4. *The need to prepare and train adopters to support and meet their children's identity needs including through direct contact.*

CVAA would struggle to identify a VAA or RAA where this is not happening to some degree already and we think it is important to recognise that there has been a significant shift in the views and approach of prospective adopters and adopters when it comes to direct contact and supporting children's identity needs, as has been evidenced by the data gathered by Adoption UK's Adoption Barometer. For example, the most recent survey found that overwhelming majority (97%) of new adopters were willing to meet their child/children's birth family members.

This important meeting is viewed by VAAAs as an opportunity for adopters to see beyond the information contained within CPRs. Too often these files are legalistic or compiled by individuals who are currently in an adversarial or conflict driven relationship with birth family members. This can heighten any anxiety adopters may be feeling about maintaining relationships, particularly where there will be regular direct contact, whereas a face-to-face meeting which is appropriately supported can often reduce fear and anxiety about establishing an ongoing relationship.

An initial meeting should therefore be built into all introduction plans or at an agreed point pre-placement unless a justification can be provided. In these instances, VAAAs believe that RAA/LAs should demonstrate clearly why a meeting is not feasible or beneficial and this decision should be included in the documentation submitted to Court, as well as being reviewed at a later date. At the very least prospective adopters should be able to communicate something in writing to birth parents to lay the groundwork for possible future communication and contact.

Understandably, these meetings can be highly emotional, so it is vital that adequate preparation and support is dedicated to them. Currently VAAAs report that they can too often feel like a missed opportunity for some detailed preparation and debriefing which focusses on a new relationship having been established. We say this as VAA member experiences show that whilst these meetings have happened for a long time for some children, the nature and purpose of them has remained fairly static, in that they are short and can sometimes even feel like a box is simply being ticked.

Feedback from VAAAs also suggests that not only are adopter attitudes changing, but the expectations of agencies is significantly higher when recruiting so that all prospective adopters are being routinely supported to develop broader understanding of contact and the importance of maintaining relationships



for children. As part of this, CVAA members often ensure they have adopters, birth parents and adoptees in attendance as part of preparation training to help bring to life the benefits of contact as well as what can go wrong when adopters are not open to supporting children's relationships.

However, CVAA fully acknowledges that the work we are involved in is continually evolving as we learn, and we know that more needs to be done to ensure that all adopters are properly prepared for supporting their children with maintaining key relationships and have the right advice and support to navigate the complexities that can arise once the child is placed with them. This needs to happen throughout the process for prospective adopters, not just in preparation, and for example should include extensive support from social workers who know the child's case and family history to ensure that prospective adopters can make informed decisions about contact needs based upon up to date and full case information.

While many examples of good practice exist across England & Wales, the issue is that it is not consistent, which directly impacts children. Again, CVAA would therefore welcome further steps to see these national standards developed by English RAAs and good practice and learning shared more widely, including the evidence and research-based proposals (see our proposals below) which were developed for our recent report *My People*. VAAs are also committed to continuing to come together to share best practice and would welcome further opportunities to collaborate with statutory agencies on preparing and supporting adopters to support children's identity needs. Again, it is important to note that a child's cultural, ethnic and religious heritage are areas where due consideration must be given to ensure that any plans to support relationships and identity development take account of important lessons learned over recent years.

Finally, CVAA would highlight that reliance on the social work workforce to meet these objectives alone is unrealistic and much better use should be made of online, digital and virtual learning opportunities. Applicants are getting younger and often it feels as though the sector is behind in terms of how young people see and experience the world and learn. VAA members PACT (Parents and Children Together) in Reading have invested heavily in a well-used and respected online platform *CATCH (Children and Trauma Community Hub)* which combines online materials co-produced with adoptees, adopters and professionals and delivered as webinars, courses, chats and live workshops. Such resources, of which there are more and more in the voluntary sector, are accessible and used on the learner's own terms and so can often be more flexible and impactful.

##### *5. The need for more training for other key decision makers throughout the process as to the benefits of maintaining relationships for adopted children.*

Whilst VAAs continue to work hard on recruiting more adopters who can be matched with children who wait the longest, and preparing them for a greater focus on contact, we know that this alone will not deliver the sea change in how contact is delivered for children. CVAA therefore agrees with the draft report that steps must also be taken to train and educate other key stakeholders and decision makers within the adoption sector so that everyone supports and delivers the vision that this report sets out.

Our experience in developing a cost-effective virtual learning platform in our Practice Programme has shown that a wide range of topics can easily be disseminated to a wide audience and have impact on practice. We also support the approach to creating flexible and accessible learning opportunities taken by Adoption England and the ability to work across the whole sector, when possible, to include RAAs and VAAs in shared learning. However, we still have progress to make when it comes to penetrating social work colleagues outside of adoption.

Feedback from CVAA members consistently suggests that LA social workers who are responsible for children's case management and key decisions, continue to too often be a barrier to more progressive contact arrangements and often do not understand the realities of adoption on a long-term basis either for the child, birth parents or adopters. It is acknowledged that these decisions can sometimes be driven by high caseloads, resource constraints and a lack of training rather than them not wanting to prioritise the needs of the child, however tackling these underlying drivers of behaviour will be key to change.

A number of VAAs also noted that lower numbers of adoptions in recent years combined with high turnover in social work roles had also contributed to a situation where a social worker may be working on an adoption case for the first time, or certainly for the first time in years. This can impact how decisions are made, including their confidence to take a more progressive approach to maintaining children's relationships if this is perceived to require more risk mitigation and planning.

We agree that a key part of driving cultural change will be ensuring that decision makers understand and recognise the benefits – both long and short-term – that contact has for adopted young people. Given changes in post holders though there needs to be access to a rolling programme of practice development to ensure knowledge is continually being shared.

As part of this, VAAs feel there is also an important role for utilising the stories of adoptees and birth family members to bring to life the impact these changes to policy and practice could have.

In addition, however, we believe that training and education programmes around contact should not just be about the 'why' but also the 'how'. Ensuring more professionals are well equipped and able to arrange and most importantly facilitate good-quality contact for children should also be a key part of these reforms.

This is incredibly important given the evidence that increasing the frequency of contact alone will have a positive impact on children's identity. *"The evidence shows that well-facilitated contact is associated with positive well-being outcomes for children and young people in both the short and long term. Conversely, poorly managed contact is associated with negative impacts for children and young people's well-being. Support for everyone involved in contact—children, carers, adoptive parents and birth relatives—is key, and depends on the investment of time and resources."* (Iyer et al., 2020). This underlines again the need for changes to process to be accompanied by the right level of investment, training and sharing of best practice, and to be delivered within the context of a multi-disciplinary support plan for children which recognises that their contact, therapeutic and overall identity needs are inherently intertwined.

Finally, VAAs also felt it was welcome that the report acknowledges the need for lawyers to also receive training on the benefits of contact in adoption and to hear about how adoption is changing to become more open. This will hopefully help inform their decision making and in particular give judges confidence to grant Placement Orders without fearing this will almost automatically mean the end of a number of relationships which are important to that child. VAAs were aware for example of cases where adoption had not been pursued due to concerns about sibling relationships breaking down. With the right contact plan, and a clear plan for supporting this in place, this should not be a barrier to a child who is otherwise right for adoption remaining in care.

*5. The need to explore digital platforms to help facilitate more regular and more meaningful contact for adopted children, particularly as they grow up.*

CVAA and its members support the exploration of use of digital platforms to enable indirect contact. In this modern and digital age, letters are fast becoming obsolete and the way that birth and adoptive families communicate needs to align with this.

VAAs also see real opportunity from digital communications to allow the exchange of messages to be more frequent and to also support the sharing of images and videos which VAAs believe could enrich indirect contact for all parties.

As the report rightly highlights, there are some existing tools being piloted and explored which could enable digital contact, including ARCBOX developed by CVAA member ARC Adoption NE with extensive user involvement from children and young people themselves.

Whilst we agree with the reports assessment that consideration has to be given as to how to ensure new tools are inclusive, particularly for birth family members, we think that adopted at scale digital tools could play an important role in modernising contact, including through providing increased flexibility around how and when contact happens.

The key for taking this forward will be training and supporting families to adopt these tools. We know from current pilots that it is not enough to just make contact digital, and that there is still a need to think about how to engage families so that barriers to communication are overcome. As stated earlier in this response, VAAs think an early meeting between the adopters and birth family members can help provide a good foundation for ongoing communication so should be considered as complimentary to the adoption of digital tools. Thought will also need to be considered as to how to support children who are engaging in digital contact as this could bring up trauma issues, so everyone around the child needs to know what to do to manage this.

Another key part of digitising contact for more children will be putting in place the right structures and funding to help bring these solutions to market at scale.

Finally, VAAs also support the report's recommendations regarding putting place clearer accountability and timelines for life story books to be completed. As this year's Adoption UK Barometer laid out, only 52% had received life story materials by the end of the year in which their child/children moved into their family and only 37% described the life story materials they had received as 'good'.

To support these new obligations being met during a period where resources are constrained, RAA/LAs should look to partner with voluntary sector organisations who are well placed to support with this work and have years of experience with their own families. Without clear resourcing and accountability our experience has shown that this work just does not happen in too many cases.

Digital tools such as ARCBOS which also provide the ability to gather life story materials and help children access their story in an accessible way should also be considered part of the solution, although again ensuring children are supported to do this, particularly as they begin to explore the tougher parts of their stories will be crucial.

### **Do you have any other proposals?**

Whilst VAAs are broadly behind the direction of travel laid out in Chapter One, it is important to underline again that changes solely to process or guidance will have little effect. To be effective, the recommendations must be accompanied by the right level of investment to provide adequate support to the delivery of contact plans and to fund the extensive education programme needed to challenge the cultural resistance from social workers to the more open approach to adoption that this report lays out.

The scale of what is being proposed cannot also be underestimated, and this is against a backdrop of social worker shortages, stress related absence and high turnover which will also impact the ability for local authorities to meet the demands of putting these changes into practice. This is even more of a challenge given that supporting contact is a specialist job and requires the right skills and experience to be done effectively.

VAAs are well placed to work in partnership with RAA/LAs as the need for support for birth and adoptive families expands. Not only do they have decades of experience of supporting their own families, but the reduction in the overall number of adoption placements means that with the right commissioning models and contracts that they have the capacity to plug some of the current gaps in LA resources.

We believe this could help provide a level of independence to the support and advice on offer given we know that many vulnerable groups have complicated relationships with the LA services who are responsible for removing children from their families. Multiple studies (e.g., Featherstone et al., 2014) have reported on the poor quality of these relationships and the lack of compassion parents feel they have received, making it unlikely that statutory organisations would be their first port of call for help. There are great advantages therefore of positioning advice and support for families independently from statutory agencies to encourage greater take-up of support and a better grounding for successful working relationships which continue over time.

In terms of additional proposals, we have highlighted throughout this chapter the need for contact to be considered and delivered in context through the development of a holistic multidisciplinary support plan for every child. This will be key to ensuring that contact is tailored, appropriate and sustained throughout the ebbs and flows of a child's life.

We would also like to draw the Group's attention to our recent publication *My People* (also attached with our submission), which lays out a number of steps that could help support the aims of this report

and which lays out a vision for a new service and hub dedicated to supporting care experienced children to maintain relationships with people who are significant to them.

My People will develop and offer four things:

- A website and helpline offering advice and guidance for care-experienced children and families.
- An online resource for all professionals involved in this aspect of children's lives.
- Resources for the newly created 'Connection Champions' to support the embedding of culture change.
- A data and insight function, to map out regional variation in support services and to guide future investment.

We believe this would not only be complimentary to the proposals laid out in this report but could help provide a key foundation for some of its aims, including changing the practices of social workers supporting adopters and birth family members to better understand how to initiate changes to contact and signposting where they can access support if needed. It would also help create a national structure for bringing together good practice, evidence and advice which could provide a key platform for the changes this report wants to see in cases day-to-day. Whilst LAs might wish to retain the control and function of supporting and delivering contact plans, years of experience has shown that this is not a consistent and sustainable model so retaining this, would in our view, continue to perpetuate the same issues over time.

CVAA proposes that the ideas in *My People* work should be supported by Adoption England, who are well placed to take this forward in collaboration with CVAA and other key stakeholders, given their existing work on maintaining relationships as part of delivering the National Adoption Strategy.

As an overarching principle and approach, CVAA also feels that achieving meaningful change in adoption will require winning over the hearts and minds of professionals and adopters to the benefits of high-quality contact rather than enforcing or proscribing changes through law or policy change. VAAAs therefore feel strongly that the use of Contact Orders is not the way to drive change. It also means we believe that the court should not be reviewing contact plans after the granting of an Adoption Order in all but the most exceptional of circumstances. These reviews, if needed, should be conducted by social work professionals working in partnership with the families affected.

This again underlines the need for the recommendations of this report to be accompanied by a programme of education for all involved in adoption as to the benefits that high-quality contact can bring. It is welcome therefore that the draft report has taken on board some of the feedback from across the sector that provisions which tried to force contact upon adopters are not the right mechanism through which to achieve change.

We believe that the sector understands that contact is crucial in maintaining relationships for children and so we now need the investment and support to deliver this work effectively.

## Chapter Two – Access to Records

There is no doubt, from both reading this report and talking with our members, that the current regulatory framework for storing and accessing records is overly complex and requires a radical overhaul. Too often we hear from our members that records have been lost or redacted and they are left unable to help adopted people seeking information about their early life or birth relatives. It is also too commonplace that adopted people are left waiting for long periods of time after their request has been submitted, with little to no certainty about when their case will be dealt with. This is the case for applications to both LAs and courts, and we heard of cases where it had even taken quite some time to identify the correct court. Anecdotally, members stated that they feel there has been a huge deterioration of this service over the past decade and that this has occurred during a period in which more and more record requests are being received from adults placed for adoption under The Children Act 1989.

We also strongly agree that there is not enough information available for those who want to find their records, and that much of the information that is available is very complicated or unclear. This contributes to the amount of time it takes both for adoptees to begin the process and for professionals to help them find answers.

The report rightly acknowledges how important this point in time is for adoptees in their identity journey. Accessing their records can understandably be emotionally challenging both because the information may be overwhelming and because the type of language used in these documents, particularly older records, can provide a judgemental or one-sided view of an adoptee's birth family. Despite this, currently support for adopted people is woefully inadequate and unfairly age limited.

VAAAs are experienced at providing support to their adoptees and their families at this crucial time. In fact, 2022/23 CVAA members provided almost two and a half thousand hours of support to adult adoptees who were trying to access their records.<sup>4</sup> However, this is nowhere near sufficient given the number of people seeking their records each year and the level of support that is needed. Current Adoption Support Fund funding for accessing records is also currently time limited, meaning that too often people are left alone and unsupported at this crucial point. Looking ahead, removing barriers to support and greater partnership between RAAs/LAs and the voluntary sector will therefore be key to improving for the experiences of adopted people accessing their records.

But it is not just the lack of support which is currently concerning. As the report acknowledges, the lack of dedicated resources and expertise in this specialist field to help with tracing records also means that waiting lists can be very long and leave adopted people with little certainty or information about when their documents will be given to them. This uncertainty can also cause further anxiety and emotional distress to adult adoptees. Investment in training more specialists and appointing more dedicated staff will be key to tackling this. This should also include ensuring that those working in this field are trained to recognise when they should refer people to other specialist support including, identifying the signs of mental health breakdown, self-harm and suicide risk.

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<sup>4</sup> CVAA Annual Member Data Return 2022/23

Like the other chapters, if the recommendations in this report are to make a real difference for adopted people, then the changes it proposes must go hand-in-hand with increasing the level of funding committed to this part of adoption. Adopted people have repeatedly expressed concerns about the lack of capacity in the workforce to meet their needs and so it is crucial that this does not continue. Our VAA members are committed to supporting the statutory sector to deliver services to help reduce this gap.

Overall, the feedback from CVAA members on this chapter was overwhelmingly positive. In particular there was strong support for:

- More public information about how to access records in an accessible way and across multiple websites. CVAA and its members would be happy to collaborate on creating materials to support this and to promote these when they are ready. Several members also strongly support the need for a clear application template for adopted people.
- Clearer pathways for those accessing records and streamlined processes to reduce wait times.
- Creating a protocol to standardise the archiving and retention of records, and we support the work currently being undertaken by UCL to support this.
- The creation of a national register of court files along with the creation of a national protocol. There was strong support for this from across our membership.
- The need for dialogue and collaboration from the English and Welsh Governments, along with the courts to provide more consistency for adoptees and social workers.
- The need for more clarity when it comes to timeliness when LAs and Courts are processing an access to records request. This will be key to reducing uncertainty for adoptees and can help ensure these types of requests are not routinely being deprioritised.
- Some regulatory standards about how long a wait is acceptable for a service (although members felt that this could be strengthened in the recommendations).
- Bringing more consistency to the approach and support available for adoptions which are pre- and post-commencement. The need to address inconsistency in court fees (which is noted and should be addressed in the recommendation).
- Possibly returning to a national model like the old service run by NORCAP which housed expertise, advice and support in one service, although elements of our proposals in *My People* do cross over into this territory.

We are also very supportive of the work being undertaken by Professor Beth Neil and the team at UEA and hope that this can build upon the recommendations laid out in this report.

However, as highlighted above it must be recognised that the changes proposed will have little impact without the appropriate funding for support and training across the sector.

Accessing records is specialist work and currently the number of individuals working in this area is limited, particularly in the statutory sector where turnover of social workers has been particularly high. It was noted by VAAs that the regionalisation of adoption has also diluted rather than strengthened expertise in access to records in the statutory sector.

Support is also lacking and whilst VAAs have stepped up where they can with support to adoptees placed by them, often relying on fundraising efforts to do so, this is not a sustainable model. As a result, without a longer-term funding strategy an increasing number of adult adoptees will be left unsupported at a critical and highly emotional time.

It is our belief that the duty to signpost adoptees to support should also be extended. The impact of accessing records cannot be dealt with overnight, and there should therefore be a duty to help individuals come to terms with their record's contents rather than just accessing them.

As a smaller point VAAs felt that the following recommendation "As part of the National Adoption Strategy, the government should specifically seek out and address the experiences of adopted adults who request access to their adoption records" requires further specificity or should be removed from the recommendations listed. We already have evidence from adoptees about very complex, poor and difficult experiences and we know that many feel their human rights have been violated by case records being redacted, lost, or not shared.

In addition, VAAs noted that putting in place the right processes and standards will take time. It is important therefore that there is also immediate action to tackle the current backlog and to reduce waiting times for adoptees now. This should include increased training for staff on finding and accessing files given the specialist nature of the work such as how to carry out intermediary work and the difference between pre- and post-commencement adoptions.

Finally, while it is perhaps outside of the scope of the report CVAA members felt it is important to acknowledge that alongside improving access to records, it is key that there is an ongoing focus on improving the quality and appropriateness of adoption records for the adult adoptees of the future. It is widely recognised that historical records were overly judgemental and feedback from CVAA members suggests that progress to change this has been slow.

## **Chapter 3 – Practice and Procedure**

### **Placement and Adoption Orders**

CVAA supports the fundamental rights of birth parents, however the group of children subject to a placement order will be subject to an already lengthy process and the legal scrutiny applied to care planning cases before a Placement Order is awarded is extensive. We therefore also support the fact the report considers removing the right for birth families to apply to the court for leave to oppose the making of adoption orders. Our experience has been that applications can be made with little evidence to support them in reality and yet the delay and anxiety to all parties, including birth families, is disproportionate at this stage of the process, where the child will usually be settled with their new family. We say this not to undermine the rights of birth parents further, as we recognise that they are already vulnerable throughout this process.

Whilst we recognise the logic and rationale behind not taking forward this change before the impact of the recent changes to legal aid are known, CVAA members think it is very unlikely that these reforms will make a difference to the outcome of these applications. This is due in part because of capacity



challenges facing legal aid lawyers, but more importantly because of the numerous steps and rigor of the process which leads up to an adoptive placement being made and the subsequent application for an adoption order. We do not believe that further delay and uncertainty at key stages of this process is in the best interests of children.

Unless this is proven to be an incorrect assumption, we would support this right being removed at the end of this period.

However, whilst VAAs believe drawing out the legal process can prolong uncertainty for all parties unnecessarily, we do recognise why it may feel important for a birth parent to have the option to put on the record their objections if, for example, they want their child to see that they fought against their adoption. However, instead of this being done via a legal challenge which causes emotional distress and delay for all parties VAAs suggested that this could be done via a supported letter to the court, or a session with a mediator.

CVAA members also highlighted the well-known need to bolster support for birth family members during this difficult time. Again, the current work being undertaken by the Family Rights Group will provide a useful tool for understanding where investment in birth family support is needed.

### **Progressing from Stage One to Stage Two**

CVAA members also support the change in regulation to allow prospective adopters to progress to Stage Two without Stage One checks having been completed. Similarly, to those in the statutory sector, many VAAs reported that they continue to experience significant delays in relation to adoption medicals and other checks which unnecessarily delay prospective adopters starting Stage Two. This system already works well in the fostering sector. However, in such cases we would still wish for the right to the IRM to remain an option only for applicants for whom Stage 1 is fully completed and signed off under the current rules.

Given the evidence of a narrowing gap between the number of adopters approved and the number of children waiting, any steps which can ensure that adopters are assessed in a timely manner can only be positive. We caution against speeding up timescales though as this is contrary to all the work needed to adequately prepare adopters as well as assess them. The last round of legislation changes reduced timescales dramatically and we believe that reducing them further could add more risk.

### **Celebration Visits**

The report rightly recognises some of the current challenges with celebration visits, including both the use of the term 'celebration' and the potential challenges for adopters attending court. Despite this, feedback from VAAs suggests that the option of celebration visits for adopted children (even if they are renamed and several members supported this happening) should be retained. In particular, for older children who may have more awareness of the role of 'the judge' in deciding they would be adopted it could be important and symbolic for them to have the opportunity to meet the person who made such a life changing decision, or even just to have a day which marks their adoption.

It was also noted that for some children the celebration visit can help with reaffirming the permanence of their adoptive placement, particularly if they have experienced multiple moves in care.

To mitigate some of the challenges identified by the report, VAAs suggested that it should be considered on a case-by-case basis whether the visit could take place at an alternative court, and whether courts could look to group celebration visits into a particular morning or afternoon each month, akin to citizenship ceremonies. This would not only mean that the potential for birth family members being in attendance is reduced, but it also provides the opportunity to remove other potential triggers for adopted children attending court, e.g., the presence of police officers in waiting areas dealing with other cases. It also provides an opportunity for new connections to be made in the adoptee community.

## **Chapter Four – Adoption with an international element**

CVAA members support much of the content of this chapter, despite the fact that only a handful of our agencies are involved in this work but felt that it fell short of the full scope and complexity of children coming into or leaving England and Wales on adoption plans. VAAs stated that this section highlights all of the key issues and lays out clearly some steps which could help tackle the current challenges and complexities in the intercountry adoption process. Our key member agency, Coram IAC the only specialist intercountry adoption agency in the UK, has spent 26 years building up expertise in this subject area and yet their services are woefully underutilized by the statutory sector.

Fundamentally, as part of the UK, England and Wales are signatories to the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. However, only England actually has a dedicated expert team within the Department for Education, and as this is not a priority service for LAs, there is no surprise that regulation, guidance and practice are very out of date and not reflective of the current issues surrounding intercountry adoption. We believe that the Central Authorities for Adoption in England and Wales should have much stronger relationships between them. It is also fact that England and Wales do not see themselves as countries involved in intercountry adoption, given the historic implications of children being ‘shipped’ to Canada and Australia, yet children are being placed with family members abroad, on adoption plans.

CVAA members are aware that intercountry adoption is the only route available to vulnerable children who may have been orphaned abroad, to safely join family members in England and Wales. Fundamentally, we do not believe that this should be the case, but if intercountry adoption is to remain the only route, such identified children should be allowed entry to the UK on a temporary visa whilst family members are prepared and assessed here at home. At present there can be a delay of 12-24 months or more for the usual intercountry adoption processes to be undertaken. Members felt strongly that there should be shorter timescales for kinship carers who are attempting to keep children within the family, which is often in children’s best interests.

Currently, there is no state funding at all for any intercountry adoption services, in stark contrast to almost all of Europe where funding ranges from 25-100% of all costs. Therefore, in England and Wales the costs to be allowed to apply to be assessed for suitability to adopt via the intercountry route (children incoming to England and Wales) is often prohibitive for families or makes the process longer as they often need to save and / or borrow funds to complete the process. Consideration should be given to government funding of the process in either all or some cases, particularly adoption support.

CVAA members agreed with the report's assessment that the process needs to be clear, straightforward and easy to understand. They view this as not only essential to avoid delay for children but to also avoid unnecessary costs for families. We believe this requires an extensive review of legislation and guidance in order to bring about greater consistency in the current disparate processes as detailed in the report.

As part of improving timescales and reducing complexity for families, VAAs felt that more needed to be done to make LAs aware of their statutory responsibilities in this area. Many already contract this highly specialist service to our member VAA, Coram IAC but too often prospective adopters are being told that there is no service available, which is incorrect. CVAA has lobbied for and continues to support the request for central funding from the government to enable all LAs and RAAs to access Coram IAC's expertise in such cases.

A huge vulnerability that exists currently is when children are arriving in the England and Wales on guardianship or adoption orders that are not recognised, e.g., from countries like Nigeria, Pakistan and Morocco. The prospective adopters will have followed a legal approval and placement process in order to bring the child into the country, but on arrival the child currently has no protected status despite the fact that their new home local authority is legally responsible for supervising the placement and recommending adoption. Children in such cases have been subject to child protection investigations and we strongly feel that they need some kind of protected status that is recognised in law and statutory services from point of entry into the country.

Further to this, a practical issue is the lack of recognition of the position of intercountry adopters by the Home Office. This can mean that after years of legal adoption related processes, and finally being matched with a child (for example someone adopting from India is looking at 5 years as a minimum from application to adopt to placement) adopters have no priority when it comes to applying for a visa for their child, even when that child's adoption is recognised, and the child is technically a British citizen. This must be remedied, as often delays can add months or even a year or more to the time children remain abroad at a time when every day is important. We note that the vast majority of intercountry adopters (85-90%) caught up in this process are themselves from Global Majority backgrounds and perceive the experience of services from the Home Office at this stage to be 'hostile', despite the fact that the majority of them are themselves British Citizens.

VAAs also agreed with the draft report that legislative changes should ensure that the law is clear and uncomplicated to aid in cases being dealt with quickly and efficiently right through the process.

In relation to children being placed abroad (outbound cases) we are aware that there is significant delay in some care planning cases where it is not known which legislation a receiving country will recognise if a child is being placed in their jurisdiction. For example, an SGO awarded in an English or Welsh court will have no bearing whatsoever in the USA, Canada or South Africa to name just a few countries. In these countries, just like England and Wales, a child can only be placed with a family member on an Adoption Order. There is little awareness of this in many LA legal teams though despite the fact that Coram IAC developed and ran a service specifically for this purpose called the Outbound Permanence

Service from 2017. In 2023 it was moved to Coram BAAF for greater reach through their membership services, as again it was highly underutilised.

A related point on this matter is that CVAA would support the government routinely collecting data on any child being placed abroad and a follow up on outcomes as this does not happen, so we have no idea how many English and Welsh children are being placed abroad and what becomes of them. CFAB (Children and Families Across Borders) found examples of children being back with birth parents, with new carers and in some cases in institutions, which is of course very concerning. We also support CFAB's international social service advice line being made much better use of when navigating assessments and support services abroad, as they have the expertise on the ground.

## **Chapter Five – Adoption by Consent**

Overall CVAA members support the recommendations set out in this chapter. It is positive to see steps laid out which can improve the current process and the timeliness of decision making.

Given the complexity of consent in these cases and the relatively low number of relinquished babies each year, VAAs welcomes the reports suggestion that not only is there a strategy which lays out how staff will be trained in the relevant law and policy provisions, but that it also sees a role for regional hubs which can develop the requisite expertise in this specialised field.

To accompany this, it is vital that equal focus and increased investment is put into increasing support for birth parents to acknowledge that a decision to relinquish does not diminish in any way the emotional damage and impact that adoption will have on them and their wider family. As the report recognises, this support should be available not just at the point of relinquishment but over the longer term.

In addition to support, the report rightly recognises the need to make consent forms as simple and clear as possible for birth parents which CVAA welcomes.

We also strongly support the recommendation that public funding for legal advice and representation should be available before and after birth to those considering relinquishing a baby. This is key to ensuring that consent is being scrutinised, and that all options are being explored with birth parents with a party independent of the LA. Similarly, VAAs were positive about the report's recognition of the important role CAFCASS play in these cases, and the need to involve them at the earliest stage possible.

Secondly, VAAs support the report's recommendation that early permanence should be considered for all relinquished babies given the benefits of minimising moves for children at such a crucial point of development. For this to be achieved though, some extensive and complex work has to happen across multiple agencies pre-birth. To support this, agencies suggested that a justification should be provided to the court if this is not pursued or achieved.

VAAs would also support steps ensure that an appropriate level of information is collected about the relinquished child's birth family and history, and that thought is given as to whether it is possible for contact to be re-established in future, either with the birth mother or birth family members, although we note the desire for confidentiality in some cases, particularly where there are cultural reasons.

In relation to that point, VAA members were also keen to highlight that in some cases the cultural and / or ethnic background of birth parents, particularly birth mothers, may have a significant bearing on the decision to relinquish a child for adoption. This should be a consideration in how we view such cases and possibly even review the use of the word relinquish, particularly as it has been repeatedly challenged by those affected by forced adoptions as highlighted in multiple inquiries.

## Conclusion

As this response lays out, CVAA welcomes many of the recommendations from the Public Law Working Group and is pleased to support the overall direction of travel that it proposes. As an important member of the adoption sector, we and our members stand ready to do whatever we can to improve adoption services and outcomes for any child and their families who will be affected.

We have consulted widely with our members across England and Wales to inform this view and also worked across the sector with partners to discuss and debate our vision for adoption going forwards. This includes Adoption England, Coram BAAF, Adoption UK, National Adoption Service of Wales and RAAs. We are pleased that we all share a common mission to improve the experiences of adoptees at every stage of their lives and that many of the key messages in our responses are supported by these partners.

As we have reiterated throughout our response, the recommendations alone will not be sufficient to drive the change in adoption that the whole sector needs. Without the required level of investment to bolster resources and skills in a sustained manner, it is CVAA's concern that not only will the system and workforce be placed under increased strain but that the children and families this report seeks to support will not benefit from the changes that are proposed and greatly needed. It cannot also be ignored that legislative and regulatory change which is required in some chapters will rely on political will and parliamentary time which are currently already very stretched.

We would also like to draw attention to the learning from adoption practice and research, that can be drawn on internationally and the importance of listening to those with lived experience. Modernising adoption is happening across the globe and in some countries policy, practice and legislation are supporting better outcomes for adoptees. For example, in New South Wales, Australia, since late 2020 all adopted people can apply for two birth certificates: a post-adoptive one and an integrated birth certificate, with the sole aim of giving adoptees access to their birth history and recognising their integrated identity as an adoptee. We believe that such examples are progressive and truly signify a modern approach to adoption which makes use of much of the research and expertise that exists on mental health, identity, trauma and adoption. Adoptee voices here in England and Wales, as well as internationally, have contributed much to the debate on modern adoption and if we are to make progress, we must listen and learn from those affected the most, whilst still retaining adoption as a viable and positive outcome for children who need it.

The government's review into Children's Social Care highlighted that the care system must deliver better outcomes for all children affected and we wholeheartedly support this. Investment so far has fallen short of what is required and of course this remains a concern for the sector, as does the status of

adopted children when kinship care and other permanence options are not an option. Despite their difficult pre-birth and early life experiences, on the making of an adoption order, adopted children lose access to a whole host of rights and services as care experienced individuals, yet their lifelong needs are identical to their peers who are not adopted. In order for adoption to modernise and recognise the full spectrum of need, we believe that all adopted children should retain priority access to support and services as a result of having been in care and that this should be lifelong.

Finally, we wish to see policy, practice, legislation and resources combine to better the experiences of adoptees at each stage of their life journey. The care system exists to protect vulnerable children and we owe it to those being adopted to do better than ever. CVAA and our members look forward to collaborating across the sector to deliver these ambitions in the coming months and years.

**CVAA**

**November 2023**