



# Can 'fast track' adoption work?

## *Lessons from YAA's Dfe Expansion Grant Project*

### **Introduction**

In January 2015 **Yorkshire Adoption Agency** (YAA) received an 'Expansion Grant' from the Department for Education (DfE). This report provides the main findings of an **independent evaluation** of YAA activities funded through the grant.

### **Yorkshire Adoption Agency**

YAA is an independent Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAAs) covering 19 Local Authority Areas in England. Their primary purpose is to **recruit, approve and support potential adoptive parents** and work with local authorities to **place vulnerable children who are 'Looked After'** in a secure home environment. YAA also provides inter-country adoption services.

### **Department for Education Expansion Grants**

The DfE contracted the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) to distribute and manage £13 million of Expansion Grants between 2014-16 for new and existing VAAs. The main aim of the expansion grants is to build the capacity of the voluntary adoption sector to recruit sufficient adoptive parents to meet the needs of children who are harder to place, as well as building a bigger share of the adopter recruitment market.

### **Aims of YAAs Grant Funded Activity**

YAA received a Booster Grant under the scheme. They used the grant to develop and test a 'fast track' approach adopter recruitment and support, with a view to generating a step change the way they support the placement of 'Harder to Place' children. Key activities delivered through the grant included:

- Resourcing a new 'fast track' process, through the appointment of two new dedicated social workers.
- Redesigning and increasing the range of training and support for adopters of 'Harder to Place' children.
- Holding additional conversion meetings during the adoption process to encourage adopters to consider 'Harder to Place' children.

YAA developed these activities to provide additional support for adoptive families, pre and post placement, in order to reduce the time it takes to approve adopters of 'Harder to Place' children from six months to four months. The overall aim was to place an additional 10 'Harder to Place' children over the life time of the grant (19 in total). It was also hoped that YAA's experience of and learning from the process would be shared with DfE, CVAA and the wider VAA sector.

## An Underpinning Hypothesis

YAA's Expansion Grant is based on the hypothesis that prospective adopters are more likely to adopt 'Harder to Place' children, and that children will be placed more quickly for adoption if...

*...the first two stages of the adoption process are completed in a shorter timescale, and...*

*...tailor made support is available without delay*

The overall aim of the evaluation was to identify evidence in support of this hypothesis.

## Policy Context

YAA's Expansion Grant project is being delivered during a time of considerable change for adoption services in the UK. In January 2016 the Government published *Children's social care reform: a vision for change* in which it outlined an overarching vision for transforming the quality of children's social care services by 2020. This was followed in March 16 by *Adoption: a vision for change* which outlined the Government's plans for restructuring the adoption system over the next few years. Of particular relevance to the work undertaken by YAA through its Expansion Grant was a commitment to provide high quality support for families during the adoption process. This will also be necessary given the anticipated changes within a new regionalised system.

## Methodology

The evaluation was undertaken using a mixed qualitative/quantitative methodology. It involved three main research tasks:

- Interviews with key YAA staff involved in the development and delivery of the grant.
- Interviews with four adoptive parents supported by YAA during the period covered by the grant: two who had been through the fast track process and two who had been through the normal process.
- Analysis of YAA's Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) performance statistics for 2014/15 and 2015/16.

The evaluation findings are reported in the subsequent sections, covering achievements, learning, adopter experiences and the potential economic benefits.

## Achievements

Analysis of the ALB data highlights a number of notable achievements during the period covered by the Expansion Grant funding:

- An overall reduction in the amount of time taken to approve potential adoptive parents (stage 2).

	2014/15	2015/16	Before DfE grant	After DfE grant
Average approval time (days)	91.29	80.14	98.91	79.30
Change in average approval time	-12%		-20%	

- An increase in the number of 'hard to place' children placed with adoptive families.

	2014/15	2015/16	Before DfE grant	After DfE grant
Number of 'hard to place' children placed	5 out of 10	22 out of 24	7	22
Change in number of children placed	+17		+15	

## Learning

Through the qualitative elements of the evaluation a number of learning points have emerged about the delivery of the Expansion Grant activity and the development of the fast track process.

- **There was very little lead in time from when the YAA were awarded the grant by DfE.**

They were awarded the grant in mid-January 2015 even though it actually started on the 1st of January i.e. before they actually knew they were getting it. Following the award it took YAA at least three months to recruit staff and further time to get the project up and running. YAA reflected that a three month lead-in time would have helped a smooth project inception process.

- **The grant created extra capacity within YAA, which had immediate benefits but has enabled the activities supported to be sustainable longer term.**

Through the grant funded activity YAA were able to provide more flexible, tailored and personalised support to families during the adoption process through the dedicated fast track social working. They were also able to re-design training and information materials, hold additional recruitment events and invest in more up to date marketing material.

Importantly, YAA will be able to sustain the fast track process, and much of the activity funded through the Expansion Grant, due to additional income generated from inter-agency fees for placing a greater number of 'harder to place children.

- **The fast track process is effective, but requires careful explanation to potential adopters.**

Early-on in the delivery of the Expansion Grant YAA realised that potential adopters were wary of the idea of a fast track approach, in particular the words 'fast track'. In response YAA softened the terminology they used to:

***'Children for whom we will, if you agree, attempt to go through the process with you in four months or less, but you may take longer if you need it.'***

YAA reflected that, in the past, potential adopters had often asked how soon they could go to panel, so it was important to shorten the timescales wherever possible. Maintaining regular communication and dialogue with adopters during stage 2 was seen as particularly important to a successful fast track process.

YAA also reflected that their ability to complete the adoption process more quickly was dependent on external as well as internal factors. This was particularly the case during stage 1, where there were often delays, for example in receiving DBS results and medical reports. These were required from external parties without a stake in expediting the adoption process.

## **Adopter Experiences**

Adopters were largely positive about their experience of the YAA adoption process. The level of support available was generally viewed positively:

***"We spent a lot of time with our Social Worker. He was really good. He had a lot of experience."***

***"On the training they brought in some experienced adopters - that was really useful as well even though we had our friends who adopted"***

However, mirroring YAA's learning from delivery, they expressed mixed views about the idea of fast track process, suggesting careful thought is required about how the idea is presented to potential adopters:

***"We need time to reflect a little bit more perhaps...if it had been any shorter, I think there would have been some pressure to get through the work and the exercises that we needed to do, but also, I think you need to have time to reflect on some of the things that you are going through if it's the first time you do this"***

***"We thought the sooner, the better, we are ready to adopt"***

***"I think if you've got a child in mind already you know when you first start the process and then you get fast tracked because you're thinking the longer that child spends in foster care the less time they'll spend with you as adoptive parents....I think that's quite a good reason to fast track people"***

***“If you take your time through the process you’re actually learning in stages, so you’re not rushing through and learning about very important issues about adoption and attachment.....and it gives you time to prepare as well”***

YAA’s flexibility was particularly valued:

***“(YAA) brought in somebody just to do some casual work with us, he was assigned to us and he was reasonably local, but he came to our house to do all the sessions. He just basically would fit in around us”***

## **Economic Benefits**

The economic benefits of adoption for children in care, particularly those identified as ‘harder to place’, are well documented and fall into two categories:

- **Fiscal benefits:** savings to the public purse, in particular through a reduction in care costs, but also wider life course costs associated with reductions in NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and improved.
- **Economic and social benefits:** wider benefits for the economy, such as increased employment, alongside improvements in well-being and quality of life (for adopters and adopted children).

Although this is not a detailed economic evaluation, it is possible to produce a simplified assessment of the fiscal benefits associated with reductions in care costs.

- **£32,000** - the average annual costs associated with a taking a child with no additional support needs into care
- **£214,000** - the annual costs associated with a taking a child with high support needs into care
- **£27,000** - the inter-agency fee paid to VAAs for each successful adoption

This means that local authorities recoup the cost of the inter-agency fee once the placement has been sustained for 12 months. For ‘Harder to Place’ children, who are more likely to have high support needs (i.e. higher cost), the costs are likely to be recouped far sooner.

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