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ANALYSIS

Evaluation of regional adoption agencies highlights mixed progress, with some starting to improve vari

Regional adoption agencies: initial

SOCIAL CARE

By Neil Puffett

An evaluation of new regional adoption arrangements, the first of which went live last year, has found a mixed picture in terms of progress.

Provisions set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 require all councils to be part of a regional adoption agency (RAA) by 2020, with the aim of bringing together council and voluntary adoption agency expertise and resources, to help speed up matching between children awaiting adoption and prospective adopters.

As of August 2018, a total of 10 RAAs were live (see map), with three more due to launch by the end of last year. The remainder will be established over the next two years, although there are currently six local authorities with no confirmed plans. In total, up to 30 regional agencies are set to be formed.

The evaluation found that where the new arrangements are in place, there is evidence that they are starting to improve a number of aspects of the adoption process, such as speed of matching, adopter recruitment and adopter support.

There are several reported examples that combining adoption panels is leading to more timely adoption decisions. But it also highlighted a number of issues.

RAAs are struggling to attract staff, including heads of service, with the distances involved when travelling across the region cited as a challenge. Other challenges include developing shared IT and other back office functions, as well as making agreements around staff pay and conditions.

Meanwhile, some are "experiencing ongoing challenges around securing buy-in and consensus from participating local authorities".

The evaluation suggests that lack of "buy-in" came at a range of levels – including councillors, managers

and practitioners, and was particularly present where council-run adoption services were already deemed to be performing well.

"They wondered what they stood to gain in terms of performance, sharing good practice or financial efficiencies," the evaluation states.

Andy Elvin, chief executive of The Adolescent and Children's Trust (Tact), says: "There's always problems that come with someone being required to do something, rather than doing it willingly.

"Some of those that entered into it willingly are going along well. But the issue is that you are doing something that is only for a small number of children, so it is quite a lot of resource and reorganisation to put into something that has an impact on very few children in the care system."

Cost concerns

Some of those interviewed for the evaluation said they are confident the arrangement will be more cost-effective, although others have concerns it is costing more, particularly around set-up costs.

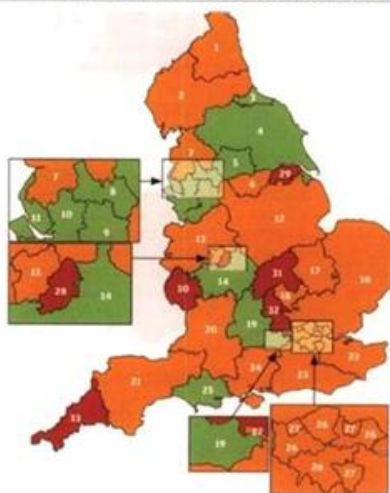
The evaluation also notes that balancing the requirements of structural change with the focus on practice to improve the quality of adoption services is "an ongoing tension".

Elvin believes extending the scope of the regional arrangements to cover all permanency options for children in care would offer the opportunity of making bigger efficiency savings, while also improving outcomes for children.

His charity has been running a permanency service in Peterborough since April 2017, as part of a 10-year deal worth £126m. It is in the process of bidding for the tender to run the planned arrangements for Cambridgeshire RAA – which will involve Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough Council.

"RAAs should become permanency hubs, covering

PROGRESS OF REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCIES IN ENGLAND



Source: Department for Education

fostering, special guardianship, and adoption," Elvin says.

"If they are to be truly radical, they should also cover support for birth parents when children are returned home from care. It would make sense for children because you would have a dedicated permanency team and all the skills right across adoption, fostering and special guardianship orders, so that would be an advantage.

"And you would absolutely get economies of scale, chiefly in terms of management, so you can invest more in the actual staff who are supporting, social workers and family support workers, because you need fewer senior managers if you have a joined-up permanency service. And, if you work over a bigger area, your recruitment would be better."

Elvin says the Department for Education's Stability Forum, a

national body established last year to oversee the entire children's social care system to create a more holistic approach to improving outcomes for vulnerable children, has indicated support for the idea.

"Regional permanency teams with co-terminus, but separate, children's social care commissioning hubs can address stability, sufficiency, cost and, most importantly, ensure all family types receive the support they need," he says.

Charlotte Ramsden, chair of the Association of Directors of Children's Services' health, care and additional needs policy committee, says there is a mixed picture in terms of progress.

"There is no one-size-fits-all model and the impact on local authorities varies," she says.

"We know, anecdotally, that some councils are benefiting from shared expertise, resources and

pects of the adoption process, while others are struggling to attract staff and develop shared IT functions

Successes, emerging challenges

REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCIES AT AUGUST 2018

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Adopt North East | 20. Adoption West |
| 2. Coast to Coast | 21. Adoption South West |
| 3. Adoption Tees Valley | 22. Kent RAA |
| 4. One Adoption (North and Humber) | 23. Adoption South East |
| 5. One Adoption West Yorkshire | 24. Adopt South |
| 6. One Adoption South Yorkshire | 25. Aspire Adoption |
| 7. Lancashire | 26. Adopt East London, Adopt North London, Adopt West London, Adopt South London |
| 8. Adoption NoW | 27. Ambitious for Adoption |
| 9. Adoption Counts | |
| 10. Together for Adoption | |
| 11. AIM | |
| 12. East Midlands | |
| 13. North Midlands | |
| 14. Adoption Central England | |
| 15. Adoption@Heart | |
| 16. Adopt East | |
| 17. Cambridgeshire RAA | |
| 18. Adopt Central East | |
| 19. Adopt Thames Valley | |

Local authorities where nothing is yet planned:

28. Birmingham
29. North Lincolnshire
30. Herefordshire
31. Northamptonshire
32. Buckinghamshire
33. Cornwall

- Local authorities in live RAAs
- Local authorities not yet in live RAAs
- Local authorities where nothing is yet planned

processes, but it is very early days and the evidence base around impact is still developing given that many projects are yet to go live and become established.

Opportunities and challenges

"We are also aware that some authorities have concerns about being part of an RAA or are finding the change difficult, and this relates to their local circumstances. "As with any partnership arrangement, there will be opportunities and challenges. Although each local authority is responsible for making its own decision in relation to RAA arrangements, it will be important to capture the learning coming out of the arrangements and to use this to inform and improve practice going forward so we can maximise the best adoption placements for those children who need them."

Adoption UK chief executive Dr Sue Armstrong Brown is concerned that regionalisation arrangements have not yet resulted in improvements to post-adoption support.

"Adoption UK feels that this aspect of the process is being neglected, with the government's focus instead honing in on driving recruitment and speeding up the matching process," she says.

"This was inevitable, to some degree, as the early stages of the transition period to regionalisation slowed down adoptions and contributed to the adopter shortfall.

"What Adoption UK would most like to know is how will regionalisation provide adequate and timely post adoption support for families across England, some of who will be in crisis?"

"If the government does not extend the Adoption Support Fund

EXPERT VIEW THE BENEFITS OF WORKING CLOSELY TOGETHER



Mark Owers,
manager, **Adoption Leadership Board**

As a government adviser on children in care, I facilitate the regional adoption agencies (RAAs) leader's group who come together regularly to support each other and to develop a collective approach to lead the regionalised adoption system. They have just invited me to complete an audit of practice and issues in the first nine RAAs to go live.

Evidently, RAAs are a challenge to get across the line, but senior leaders think it is worth it. One director of children's services (DCS) commented: "It was a hard slog and I wasn't a fan, but as a DCS regional group, we can now see many benefits of working more closely, and not just for adoption."

RAA staff know what best practice looks like and regionalisation is enabling a more systematic approach to family finding, for example. RAAs and councils are developing strong relationships to ensure children's paths to adoption, and in some RAAs, special guardianship, are seamless and effectively managed.

Children's permanency needs are being identified at the earliest point and RAAs are improving how children's lives are tracked and reviewed in readiness for adoption when it is in their best interests.

RAAs are starting to benefit from bigger pools of adopters. Interestingly, RAAs are having to consider how to best use the capabilities of all adopters in the pool and they are starting to introduce minimal delay for some children and adopters to increase the total number of children matched for adoption overall.

The quality of social work assessments is improving, practice is becoming more trauma-informed and there is an increasing focus on the impact of separation and loss.

RAA staff are promoting the benefits of fostering to adopt and concurrency. One worker said: "Early permanence is all about the child. It brings the two parts of a child's family together and children have less missing history. Empathy for birth families is enhanced and contact is improved."

RAAs and voluntary adoption agencies are facing big challenges. There are not enough adopters which reduces choice for children waiting. Siblings, older children, those from Black and ethnic minority groups, and children with a disability still wait longest. RAAs need to use better the limited expertise available in finding and supporting families to care for these children.

RAAs need to help improve how all those affected by adoption are supported, especially birth relatives and adult adoptees, as well as adoptive families. The right high-quality support must be available when and where it is needed.

They will need to develop strong relationships with schools, health services and children's mental health services to do better. They also need to help DCSs and council members to continuously improve and innovate. RAAs, typically made up of six councils, are perfectly placed to shine a spotlight on variability in performance. This in turn will enable senior council leaders to identify areas for improvement and support each other to be the best they can.

beyond 2020, then regional adoption agencies will be under great pressure to provide more robust support packages than local authorities previously have.

"We would also like guarantees that where current good practice exists in local authorities, it's not diluted as a result of the transition

to regionalisation. Instead, it should be shared and scaled up where appropriate.

"The voice of adopters – those who are at the coalface of dealing with childhood trauma – needs to be at the very heart of the regionalisation process if it is to ultimately be a success."