



Department
for Education

Adoption

A vision for change

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Foreword by Nicky Morgan MP and Edward Timpson MP

The family is the first and most important building block in a child's life and any government serious about delivering social justice must seek to strengthen families. Our ambition is to ensure proactive support for strong parental and family relationships, particularly for those families facing the most significant disadvantages.

Every child deserves a loving, stable family. For those children who cannot live with their birth parents, it is vital we find them permanent new homes as quickly as possible. Very often, the best placement will be with kinship carers or with foster carers. That is why we remain committed to improving those routes to permanence. But adoption is an important permanence option which has been proven to provide children with unique stability and care within a new family which lasts long beyond childhood. Only 3.2% of children return to care after an adoption order is granted (over a 12 year period), compared to 25% of children on a residence order (over a 6 year period).¹

Five years ago the coalition government set out its plan for improving and tackling delay in the adoption system. At that time, the number of children waiting to be adopted exceeded the number of approved adopters, children waited far too long to be adopted, and too many adopted families were struggling without support.

This situation was nothing short of tragic for the many children where adoption had been identified as being in their best interests, but who had sometimes been left waiting for years. Social justice is about partnerships across government and across sectors. The government therefore came together with local government and the voluntary sector to bring about change. Individual agencies rose to the challenge posed to them to recruit enough adopters and drive out unnecessary delay for children. Innovative new approaches to adopter-led matching were embraced by practitioners and spread rapidly through the system. The adopter approval process was radically redesigned. The government launched the first ever national Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to provide families with the therapeutic support they needed to help their child recover from the abuse and neglect they may have suffered before they entered care and we should be truly proud that 4,700 children have already received support through this fund.

Our actions have meant radical improvements to the adoption system. Over 5,300 children were adopted in 2015, up from 5,000 children adopted in 2014.² The average time it now takes for a child to get through the adoption system has reduced to 18

¹ [Selwyn J& Masson J \(2014\) Adoption, special guardianship and residence orders: a comparison of disruption rates. Family Law](#)

² [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015](#)

months – still too long but a reduction of 4 months from the peak in 2012-13.³ We have almost doubled the proportion of children being adopted within 12 months. This is remarkable progress that should be celebrated.

But there is still more to be done. The process still takes too long and not all adoptive families are receiving the support they need. Since September 2013, local authorities have almost halved the number of children they have put forward for adoption meaning children who would benefit from adoption – whose welfare requires it – are missing out.

Later this year, we will set out further details about how we will achieve our ambitious vision for children’s social care as a whole so that we support all children. But the rapid decrease in the number of adoption decisions calls for action now. Here we outline a new and ambitious plan to reverse this trend.

We are determined radically to redesign the whole adoption system, delivering new service models through Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), that see local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) genuinely working together to deliver excellent adoption services everywhere, with a strong focus on innovation and practice.

We are determined to see adoption pursued whenever it is in a child’s best interests and a system where all children are matched with adoptive parents without undue delay. We also want to ensure adoptive families receive ongoing support from the moment the child is placed with them and throughout their childhood.

That is what our children deserve and it is our duty, and our will, to ensure they have just that.



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³ [Adoption Leadership Board Business Intelligence](#)

Executive Summary

Overview

Childhood experiences have a lifelong influence. We know that a secure, loving family life is at the heart of those experiences and its absence can have profound negative consequences.

Children rely on birth parents to provide a stable, caring environment in which they can develop and make sense of the world. But birth parents are not always able to provide the positive start to life that their children need and some children experience neglect or abuse which can cause enduring problems. Where birth parents cannot meet a child's basic needs it is one of the state's most important responsibilities to step in and ensure that children can have a childhood which keeps them safe and enables them to flourish.

The right permanence option for a child will always depend on their individual needs and circumstances. If they cannot live with their birth parents, there are a number of placement types – foster care, living with a special guardian, kinship care arrangements and residential care – which can all provide the right placement. We also know that adoption, with a new permanent family, is transformative for many children. Adoption gives children the stability and love they deserve and a chance to recover from the trauma they may have suffered in early life.

What matters most is that children receive stable and high quality care. Children who enter care are vulnerable and have often already experienced abuse, neglect and disruption in their young lives – they need and deserve a social care system that acts in their best interests and provides them with the long term stability and quality of care they need, with minimal delay. Research tells us that permanence, stability, quality of care and avoidance of delay are the factors which most affect children's welfare and their future chances in life. This is what we must keep at the forefront of our minds when tasked with the responsibility of making decisions about the care of vulnerable children.

In *Children's social care reform: a vision for change* (2016) the government outlined its overarching vision for transforming the quality of children's social care services by 2020.⁴ Our ambition for this Parliament is radically to reform the children's social care system, structuring our reforms around three areas: people and leadership; practice and systems; and governance and accountability. Our adoption reforms will be delivered as part of our wider children's social care reforms, because children's social care must be treated as a

⁴ [Children's social care reform: a vision for change, January 2016](#)

whole. Later in the year we will publish a strategy on how we will deliver our ambitions for children's services.

Whilst we have made significant progress on adoption – more children being adopted, children moving in with their adoptive families more quickly, greater numbers of adoptive families getting the adoption support they need – there are still systemic weaknesses.

Children still wait too long for adoption, and too many families still miss out on vital support services that can make a huge difference.

Furthermore, new challenges have emerged over recent years which threaten to undermine the progress made. The decline in adoption numbers means there is an urgent need to accelerate our reform of the adoption system now. Most worryingly, there is reason to be concerned that at the end of a long legal process, some children are not getting the permanence option which would be in their best interests.

This paper sets out the detail of what we plan to do over the next four years to address these challenges and to secure change that will last. Our reforms have driven great improvements, but these have neither gone far enough, nor are they yet fully embedded and secured for the long term.

We are determined radically to redesign the whole adoption system – the structures, systems and workforce – to ensure we have the foundations in place to build lasting change.

We want to see systems that are designed around the needs of children and draw on the best of both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

We then need to focus relentlessly on front line practice. We need all services to deliver high quality, evidence based decisions for children every time.

And we need to ensure the right accountability is in place to drive the delivery of truly great adoption services.

Adoption: our vision for 2020

Our vision for 2020 is of an adoption system where:

Decisions about placements are always made in children's best interests.

Quality of care and stability of placement are rightly prioritised by decision makers whenever they make decisions about a child's future. Adoption is pursued determinedly when it is the right option for a child.

Service delivery has at its heart innovation and practice excellence. Systems are designed around the needs of children, free from bureaucratic barriers that do not add value, and draw on the best of both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Social workers are highly skilled professionals who make high quality, evidence based decisions and do not tolerate damaging delay for children in their care. Social workers are part of an expert, confident workforce with the knowledge and skills to make and pursue complex and challenging decisions. Once a decision for adoption has been made, the adoption plan is progressed swiftly by social workers driven by a sense of urgency.

Matches are made without unnecessary delay. RAAs provide a large pool of adopters for every child in need of a new family. Where a match is not immediately available within the RAA, the search is extended nationally without delay.

Every adoptive family has access to an ongoing package of appropriate support with a right to a high quality, specialist assessment of need. This support is delivered from day one and continues throughout childhood whenever it is required. Adoptive families have a supportive relationship with their local agency and know they can turn to them for additional support at any time, without judgment.

The voice of adopters and their children is at the heart of national and local policy decision making and delivery of services. The views of adopters and adopted children are demonstrably used in the shaping and co-production of local services and help to inform national policy developments.

Achieving Our Vision

In order to deliver this vision, we will:

Act to address unexpected falls in adoption decisions

We are taking action now to ensure that adoption is always pursued when it is in a child's best interests. To achieve this we will change the law to ensure that quality of care and stability of placement are properly prioritised.

Deliver radical, whole system redesign by regionalising adoption services

For long term, sustainable success, we need a system that operates at the right scale, with a spirit of innovation and excellence at its heart. To achieve this we will:

- ensure all local authorities become part of a RAA by 2020; and
- launch three new funding streams to support local authorities and VAAs in this ambitious work.

Invest in developing the workforce

We will have a new focus on equipping the workforce with the professional skills and knowledge to navigate complex assessment, analysis and decision making and enable adoptive families to access the right support. To achieve this we will:

- launch a new development programme to support social workers to achieve and demonstrate required knowledge and skills and have their specialist knowledge recognised; and
- publish a new Specialist Knowledge and Skills statement setting out exactly what social workers making permanence decisions need to know and be able to do.

Reduce the time children wait to be adopted

As well as speeding up matching by regionalising adoption services, we also need a dynamic national system, free of bureaucratic barriers, which finds homes for those children who cannot be placed immediately within their region. To achieve this we will:

- invest in the continued development of national matching infrastructure and innovative matching methods;
- develop and spread best practice to increase the use of early placement; and

- ensure inter-agency placements are pursued swiftly and operate on a level playing field for agencies and adopters.

Provide more high quality adoption support

We want to ensure every adoptive family has ongoing access to effective, multi-agency support. To achieve this we will:

- extend the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) which has already helped thousands of families to access crucial therapeutic services, with increased funding in every year to 2020, and develop the model to ensure long term sustainability;
- improve the evidence base for, quality of and access to mental health services for vulnerable children; and
- further support and challenge schools to meet the needs of adopted children including: use legislation to expand the role of virtual schools heads and consider how designated teachers can support adopted children, and ensuring teachers understand the impact of the range of developmental issues, including trauma and loss on children's learning.

Further embed strong performance management and accountability arrangements

We need to build on the solid progress already made and make even sharper use of data to drive high performance across the system, and we need to ensure that inspection frameworks encourage high quality practice and innovation. To achieve this we will:

- introduce scorecards for RAA performance, using better and more meaningful data from quarterly local council returns;
- work with the sector and Ofsted to produce a revised inspection framework which supports strong innovation and evidenced based practice, and works in a world where adoption services are regionalised;
- review the way the national Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) works to make sure it continues to deliver strong visible leadership with a spirit of co-operation between voluntary and public sector providers at its heart; and
- enhance the voice of adopters so that services give adopters the power of choice and that the views of adopters shape decisions about the future design of adoption services.

Chapter 1: Progress to date

Where we started

1.1 Where a child cannot be looked after by their family, it is right that society steps in to ensure that an alternative family life is made available, which provides that child with the stability and love that they need, unconditionally and forever. Too often we fail to provide this for the children who come into the state's care, but this priceless opportunity is offered by adoption.

1.2 Children who enter the adoption system have often experienced a significant amount of disruption and uncertainty in their young lives. Statistics show that 71% of these children have experienced neglect or abuse.⁵ Research shows us that delay and instability in care are detrimental to a child's future outcomes. It also increases the likelihood of disruption in the future.⁶ This means that it is absolutely crucial that these children are found stable, loving homes as quickly as possible.

1.3 Despite this, in 2010, we inherited a system where the number of adoptions was at its lowest point for a decade, and the adoption system was characterised by unacceptable delay, for both children and prospective adopters. The fundamental problems in the system at that point were:

- **Adoption was dwindling** – it was not viewed as a genuine option for many children whose best interests may have been served by it. In 2011, just 3,100 children found new homes through adoption – the lowest number since 2001;⁷
- **The adoption process took far too long** – at the outset of the adoption reform programme in 2011, the average wait between a child coming into care and being united with their adoptive parents was twenty-one months and rising, hitting a peak of 22 months in 2012-13. Some groups of children waited even longer, for example, black children and children over five waited over 30 months.⁸ Only 60 babies under one-year old were adopted in 2010-11;⁹

⁵ [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015](#)

⁶ [Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, interventions and adoption disruption, Julie Selwyn, Dinithi Wijedasa, and Sarah Meakings, April 2014](#)

⁷ [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015](#)

⁸ Analysis of the 'SSDA903 (Children Looked After)' data returns

⁹ [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015](#)

- **The speed of the process was hugely variable across the country** – most local authorities were failing to meet the timescales set out in statutory guidance and the variation between authorities was stark. In 2012 we published *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay*, which showed that five local authorities placed every single child within 12 months of the decision being made that adoption was the best plan for them.¹⁰ But another four placed fewer than half their children within the same timescale;
- **There were nowhere near enough adopters for the children waiting** – this was the primary driver of delay for children. At the end of March 2012 there were 4,770 children waiting to move in with a new family. By the end of March 2013, this figure had increased to 5,510, but there were insufficient adopters available.¹¹ Furthermore, the process for being approved as an adopter wasn't working well enough. Whilst there was excellent practice in some agencies, many prospective adopters were not satisfied with the service they received; the process was slow and some adopters felt undervalued; and
- **There was too little support available for adopters** – an Adoption UK survey in 2012 found that 64% of adopters were not informed about their entitlement to an assessment of need for support.¹² Of those adopters who had an assessment, 81% had support needs identified, but only 56% said that full support was provided. Over half needed therapeutic services, but only 28% reported receiving these.

What have we done so far?

1.4 In light of these challenges, the government launched a reform programme, the key pillars of which are described below.

National Leadership

1.5 The government appointed Sir Martin Narey as Ministerial Adviser on adoption in July 2011 and also set up an Expert Working Group led by the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS). In the 2012 publication, the government set out an adoption reform programme to improve recruitment and tackle delay in the system.¹³ Under the leadership of Sir

¹⁰ [An Action Plan for Adoption - tackling delay, March 2012](#)

¹¹ [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015](#)

¹² [It takes a village to raise a child, Adoption UK, 2012](#)

¹³ [An Action Plan for Adoption - tackling delay, March 2012](#)

Martin Narey, this reform programme has been paramount in driving forward significant improvements in the performance of the adoption system.

1.6 To ensure a sustained long term focus on adoption, the Adoption Leadership Board was formed in 2014, chaired by Sir Martin Narey, bringing together leading figures from local government and the voluntary adoption sector. This has provided sector leadership and a focus on whole system improvement.

Data driven approach to improving performance

1.7 The collection of quarterly adoption data has contributed to a much deeper understanding of the local and national situation. This data has allowed frank discussions about performance and has provided clear signals of problems in the system, which have been invaluable in taking this reform programme forward. The introduction of the adoption scorecard has also had a big impact on driving a data-led approach to local council performance management, helping authorities to identify and bear down hard on unacceptable delay. The scorecards have enabled us to challenge performance in over one third of local authorities.

Recruiting enough adopters to meet the needs of the children waiting

1.8 In 2013 we introduced First4Adoption, a single national adoption information service, which gives clear and consistent messages to potential and existing adopters. Between April 2013 and October 2015 it had 500,000 unique users. We also introduced a new, quicker two-stage process for approving adopters in 2013.

1.9 We have supported the sector to build its capacity to recruit and approve adopters over the past five years by investing £200 million via the Adoption Reform Grant to local authorities and £16 million for the VAA sector. The voluntary sector has played a crucial role in driving innovation and increased capacity in adopter recruitment. The government's £16 million investment has enabled the establishment of three new VAAs, the development of more innovative ways of working, and increased recruitment of adopters, particularly for children who wait the longest.

Driving innovation in the way children and adopters are matched

1.10 We have enabled more children to be placed in stable homes earlier by requiring local authorities, through the Children and Families Act 2014, to consider a fostering for adoption placement wherever possible. This means children can move in with their new family much more quickly and have fewer placement moves prior to adoption. The Children and Families Act also removed barriers to good placements caused by undue emphasis on finding a perfect 'ethnic' match between children and adopters.

1.11 A key innovation of the adoption reform programme has been the focus placed on involving adopters in matching. Previously, it was social workers who drove decisions around which adopters to choose for a child. Building on innovation started in the voluntary sector, adopters are now empowered and encouraged to take a much more active role, exploring for themselves the children waiting for adoption, and making their own decisions about which children they feel they could care for. The Children and Families Act 2014 enabled approved adopters to access the Adoption Register for the first time, and there has been a significant growth in the use of adopter-led matching through National Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days where prospective parents and children can meet face to face in a fun and friendly environment. These techniques have been particularly successful in helping children with additional needs find homes. In 2014-15, 300 children were matched with adopters through 25 local authority Adoption Activity Days.¹⁴

Improving support to all adoptive families

1.12 The Adoption Support Fund (ASF), worth over £19 million, came into operation on 1 May 2015. The ASF pays for therapeutic interventions that are so vital in helping children to deal with past trauma and thrive in a nurturing, stable placement. It offers a fast, simple service meaning that adoptive families can access the support they need, as and when they need it. Every local authority has applied to the fund, and so far over 4,700 families have been helped by specialist adoption support services, with more being helped each week.

1.13 We have also significantly improved the universal benefits offered to all adoptive families. Adopted children are now entitled to a free early education place from the age of two; priority admission to the school that can best meet their needs; and additional funding for their education provider through the Early Years Pupil Premium and Pupil Premium Plus at school. Adoption pay and leave entitlements are now more in line with those available to birth parents, and adoption pay has also been enhanced so that it is equal to 90% of a parent's salary for the first six weeks.

The impact of our reforms

1.14 These reforms have had a direct impact of the lives of thousands of children and their families. And they have significantly raised the profile of adoption and inspired renewed public interest, both in outcomes for adopted children and in coming forward to parent these vulnerable children. Measurable progress has been made across our priorities:

¹⁴ <http://corambaaf.org.uk/ourwork/activitydays/adoption-activity-day-march-2013>

- the number of adopters approved rose from 4,090 in 2012-13 to 5,260 in 2014-15;¹⁵
- the average time in 2012-13 of 22 months between coming into care and being placed with their new family, was cut to 18 months by 2014-15;¹⁶
- black and minority ethnic children are now being placed for adoption 5 months earlier than in 2012-13;¹⁷
- in 2012-13, only 19% of children were placed with their new family within one year of entering care. In 2014-15, this had almost doubled, and 35% of children were placed within a year;¹⁸
- in 2011, only 60 children aged under 1 were adopted compared to 230 babies under 1 adopted last year;¹⁹ and
- in its first six months, the ASF has helped over 4,700 families and distributed over £16 million.

¹⁵ [Ofsted Adoption Agency data](#) and [Adoption Leadership Board Business Intelligence](#)

¹⁶ [Adoption Leadership Board Business Intelligence](#)

¹⁷ Analysis of the 'SSDA903 (Children Looked After) data returns'

¹⁸ [Adoption Leadership Board Business Intelligence](#)

¹⁹ [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015](#)

Chapter 2: New and enduring challenges

2.1 Over the last five years, we have begun to lay solid foundations for the improvements required. We have made significant progress towards reforming the adoption system. But there is still much more to be done.

2.2 We face an immediate and serious challenge in ensuring that every child for whom adoption is in their best interests gets this decision. Since September 2013, the number of decisions for adoption has almost halved, meaning children who would benefit from adoption – whose welfare requires it – are missing out. This highlights weaknesses in the way permanence decisions are being made, and raises questions about whether social workers are being supported to develop the skills and knowledge they need to make and defend robust professional judgments.

2.3 Furthermore, over the longer term, there are some structural and systemic weaknesses in the adoption system which mean that the system is still not performing strongly enough. Eighteen months is still far too long for a child to wait for adoption, and not every family is receiving the support they need. Where performance has improved, we cannot yet be sure that this will be sustained.

Adoption decision making

2.4 From September 2013, the number of decisions being made by local authorities to pursue adoption has been declining sharply, as has the number of adoption placement orders granted by the courts. The data show that, since quarter 2 of 2013-14, local authority decisions to pursue adoption are down by a total of 41%, and the number of placement orders granted by the courts is down by a total of 50%.²⁰ The numbers of local authority decisions and placement orders granted are now below where they were at the beginning of 2011-12. Comprehensive engagement and analysis undertaken by the ALB and Department for Education (DfE) has led us to be confident in concluding that many children for whom adoption would be the best option are now missing out, and that some alternative placements are being made despite professionals having significant concerns about the quality and stability of the care on offer, and the future risk for the children involved.

2.5 Social workers are the professionals charged with analysing, making decisions about and pursuing with urgency the right permanence option for children. Whilst there is excellent practice in the sector, it is not universal. As highlighted by the President of the Family Division, Sir James Munby, in his Re B-S judgment (Re B-S (Children) [2013])

²⁰ [Adoption Leadership Board Business Intelligence](#)

EWCA Civ 1146) there remains a lack of confidence from the courts in social workers' presentation of evidenced assessments of the right options for children.²¹ This is not universal: the data show that some local areas have seen very little change in adoption decisions. But where it is going wrong, there is an urgent need to get decision making right and to ensure that assessments cover the likely needs for a child's whole childhood.

The Adoption System

2.6 There are challenges across the adoption system that exist in part because of the scale at which the system operates. The current system is highly fragmented with around 180 agencies recruiting and matching adopters for only 5,000 children per year. We know that the majority of agencies are operating at a small scale which can mean that the capacity and specialist skills in such agencies are sometimes limited.

2.7 Having a system that is fragmented in this way reduces the scope for broader, strategic planning, as well as specialisation, innovation and investment. Large numbers of small agencies render the system unable to make the best use of the national supply of potential adopters; they are more vulnerable to peaks and troughs in the flow of children, and are less cost effective. The two areas where the current system structure creates the most problems are in relation to how quickly children and adopters are matched, and the provision of adoption support services.

2.8 The system as currently designed builds in delay for children if agencies seek first to match that child with a parent they have recruited 'in house', where there is a very limited pool. Despite significant efforts to speed up processes across the system, it still takes an average of eight months between placement order and match, and some groups of children wait far longer. In 2014-15, harder to place groups of children waited on average 629 days between entering care and placement. This compares to 423 days for all other children.²² The system is therefore still not working well enough for these children. We know that delay causes lasting harm to vulnerable children and yet sequential decision making continues.

2.9 In terms of adoption support, many adopters still tell us they are unable to obtain timely adoption assessments and the support they need. We know that providing timely adoption support can dramatically improve adopted children's long term life chances and so it is vital that they can access what they need, when they need it. One of the major issues is that there are gaps in the adoption support market, both geographically and in

²¹ [Re B-S judgment \(Re B-S \(Children\) \[2013\] EWCA Civ 1146\)](#)

²² [Adoption Leadership Board Business Intelligence](#)

terms of capacity to deliver. Without further systemic change, any growth in the market is likely to be piecemeal.

2.10 Our strategy for addressing these new and emerging challenges has three parts. We will:

- reform the underpinning building blocks of the adoption system, to ensure we have the foundations on which high quality decision making and long term, sustainable success can be built;
- focus on practice, transforming the services on offer to children and families, to deliver excellence everywhere; and
- sharpen our accountability and performance management structures, to ensure delivery now and in the future.

Chapter 3: Creating the foundations for sustainable success

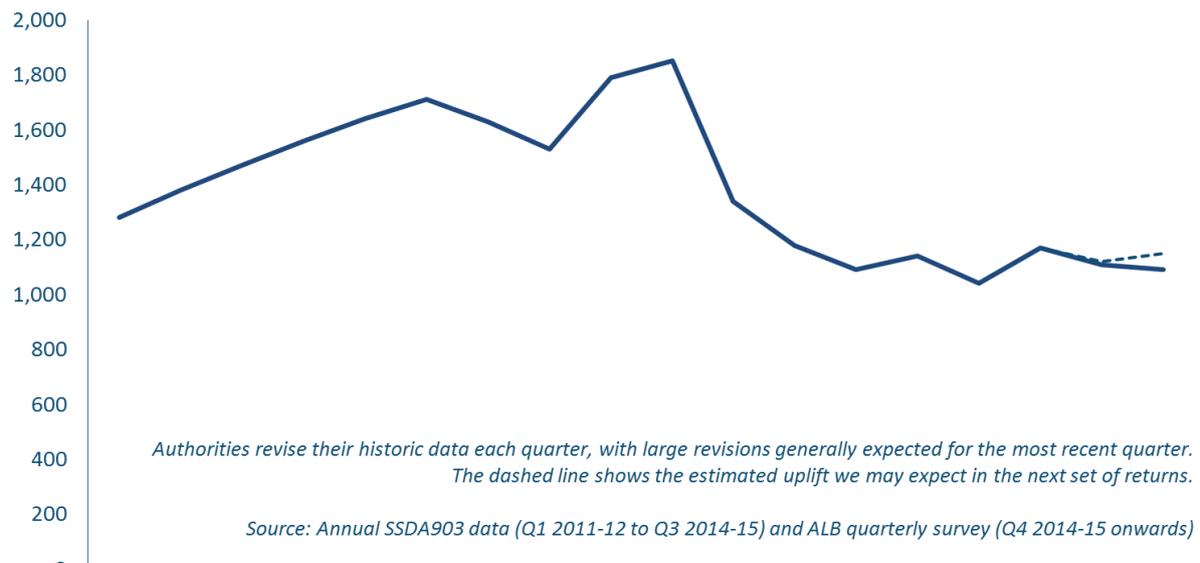
3.1 In *Children's social care reform: a vision for change* (2016) the government outlined its overarching vision for transforming the quality of children's social care services by 2020. Our ambition for this Parliament is to reform radically the children's social care system, structuring our reforms around three areas: people and leadership; practice and systems; and governance and accountability. Our adoption strategy forms a part of these reforms. This chapter sets out the way in which we will reform the fundamental building blocks of the adoption system – the structures, systems and people – to ensure we have solid foundations on which sustainable success can be built. The three building blocks we need to address are:

- **reforming the law**, to ensure the right factors – the factors which we know make a difference to children's outcomes – are prioritised when adoption decisions are made;
- **moving to a regionalised adoption system**, so that adopter recruitment, matching and adoption support are all delivered on an efficient and effective scale at consistent quality; and
- **developing the workforce**, to ensure social workers have the knowledge and skills they need to navigate complex assessment, analysis and decision making, and enable adoptive families to access the right support.

(i) Reforming the law

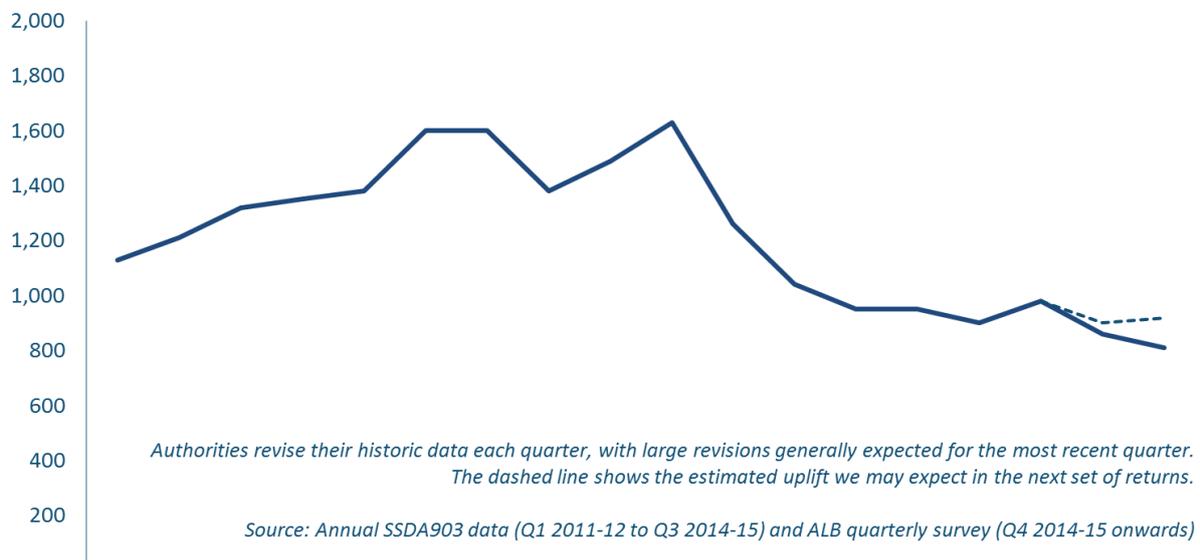
3.2 From September 2013, the number of decisions being made by local authorities to pursue adoption has been declining sharply, as have the number of placement orders granted by the courts.

Number of new Agency Decision Maker decisions in each quarter since 2011-12



Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2												
2011-12				2012-13				2013-14				2014-15				2015-16	
5,690 decisions				6,520 decisions				6,170 decisions				4,310 decisions					

Number of new placement orders granted in each quarter since 2011-12



Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2												
2011-12				2012-13				2013-14				2014-15				2015-16	
5,010 placement orders				5,950 placement orders				5,420 placement orders				3,590 placement orders					

3.3 The DfE and the ALB have looked at what lies behind these dramatic shifts in adoption decision making. Through a series of investigations with local authorities, engagement with sector leaders via the ALB, a series of seminars with local authority lawyers, and a number of short research projects, we have developed a strong picture of the new challenges in making adoption decisions. These appear to be:

- a mistaken view that the legal test for adoption has changed and the bar that must be met for an adoption placement order to be made has risen;
- a misunderstanding resulting in the view that if any extended family placement can provide ‘good enough’ parenting at the current time, this should be pursued over adoption, even if professionals have concerns about the ability of the carer to look after the child, or feel the placement is unlikely to be sustainable over the whole childhood and into adulthood; and
- a drive to eliminate delay in the family courts and conclude care cases within 26 weeks, which is leading some local authorities to believe adoption is difficult to pursue within the timescales.

3.4 These changes are believed to stem from the way two court judgments, *Re B* (June 2013)²³ and *Re B-S* (September 2013),²⁴ have been interpreted across the system. The central message from those judgements is that adoption decisions must be based on strong evidence. This is absolutely true, and the correct legal test. The President of the Family Division, Sir James Munby, has made it very clear that the judgments do not change the law. In a subsequent judgment, *Re R*,²⁵ he stated:

‘I wish to emphasise, with as much force as possible, that Re B-S was not intended to change and has not changed the law. Where adoption is in the child’s best interests, local authorities must not shy away from seeking, nor courts from making, care orders with a plan for adoption, placement orders and adoption orders.’

3.5 However, despite this unequivocal clarification, some local authorities and courts are still making dramatically fewer adoption decisions than was the case before *Re B-S*²⁶.

3.6 This means that some children whose best interests would be served by adoption are now missing out.

²³ [Re B \(a child\) \[2013\] UKSC 33](#)

²⁴ [Re B-S \(a child\) \[2013\] EWCA Civ 1146](#)

²⁵ [Re R \(a child\) \[2014\] EWCA Civ 1625](#)

²⁶ [Re B-S \(a child\) \[2013\] EWCA Civ 1146](#)

Decisions always made in a child's best interests

3.7 Achieving a permanent and loving home is a key principle of work in children's social care. Permanence is important in supporting children who have experienced abuse and neglect to recover and achieve positive life outcomes. Uncertainty and instability are damaging and can prevent children forming the secure attachments needed for good development.

3.8 For children who are not able to return safely to their families there are a number of routes whereby permanence can be achieved. For many children, foster or residential care within the care system provides the right placement; for others it will be living with carers via special guardianship orders, adoption orders, or a child arrangements order. All routes can produce positive outcomes, with the quality and stability of the placement being a key factor.

3.9 However, there is reason to be concerned about whether the right decision is always being made. Local authorities have reported to us that they feel unable to pursue adoption in some cases even where they believe it to be in children's best interests, because of the way Re B-S is being interpreted locally. The dramatic and sudden shifts we have seen in patterns of decision making do not suggest a normal, incremental change, but an extreme reaction.

3.10 Furthermore, in December 2015, the DfE published findings of a review of the way in which Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) are being used currently.²⁷ This highlighted some worrying decision making practices.

3.11 The review found that the majority of SGOs are made to carers who have an existing relationship with the child and who, with appropriate support, intend to and will be able to care for the child up to the age of 18. However, there is a significant minority of cases where the protective factors we expect to see in each case are not in place. In particular, issues have emerged around:

- rushed or poor quality assessments of prospective special guardians;
- potentially risky placements being made, for example, where the SGO is awarded with a Supervision Order because there remains some doubt about the special guardian's ability to care for the child long term; and
- inadequate support for special guardians, both before placements are finalised, and when needs emerge during the placement.

²⁷ [Special Guardianship Review, December 2015](#)

“Without doubt the pressure on courts to complete cases within prescribed timescales is placing pressure on workers to complete assessment more summarily.” (Social worker)

“Knowledge of children’s psychology and attachment is often disregarded at the expense of speedy assessments and disposal in the courts. The standard for ‘good enough’ parenting appears to be lower for special guardianship carers when compared with the standards we expect of prospective adopters.” (Senior social worker)

“Recognition should be given to impact of childhood trauma and abuse on young children, and that for some children the impact of this will not be evident for a number of years.” (Social worker)

3.12 Research shows that there are three factors which influence the success of a placement and children’s outcomes from that placement.²⁸ These are:

- **timeliness** – the speed with which a child finds their way to their stable and long term family;
- **quality of care** – the ability of the carer to adequately meet the needs of the child; and
- **stability** – whether the placement endures over the long term.

3.13 It is our view that the behaviours we have seen across the system since the Re B-S judgment expose a lack of appropriate emphasis and analysis in decision making on the quality of care provided by a placement, and the likely stability of that placement. The government is determined to address this to ensure that these factors, which research has shown are the most crucial to children’s outcomes, are rightly prioritised when decisions about a child’s future placement are made.

What changes will we make to legislation?

Factors to take into account in placement decisions

3.14 In order to ensure that the right factors – the factors outlined above, which research shows have the most significant impact on children’s outcomes – are properly prioritised, we intend to change the legal framework under which permanence decisions

²⁸ [Placement stability and permanence, Research in Practice, 2014](#)

are made. We intend to amend the Children Act 1989 to ensure the following factors are properly prioritised when local authorities and courts are considering the best permanent option for the child at the end of care proceedings:

- whether the quality of care on offer under the different potential placements being considered will be sufficient to meet the child's needs, especially in the light of the previous abuse and neglect the child may have suffered, and their need for high quality care to overcome this; and
- whether the placement will offer this quality of care throughout the child's childhood (until they are 18) – rather than right now or just in the immediate future.

3.15 We intend to bring forward legislation to make these changes as soon as possible.

Recognising the rights of prospective adopters

3.16 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 requires courts and adoption agencies, when making decisions relating to the adoption of a child, to have regard to the relationship the child has with specific categories of people. This includes consideration of the ability and willingness of any such person to care for the child. The categories of people currently consist of relatives and '*any such person the court considers relevant*'. We will amend legislation to explicitly add prospective adopters in this list, to ensure that the child's relationship with them is also considered in all cases where the child has been placed with them. Where the making of an Adoption Order is being considered, in most cases the child will have been living with the prospective adopters for 6-12 months, so it is important that the adoptive parent's role in the child's life is properly considered and the child's relationship with them.

3.17 Over the coming weeks and months, we will be talking and gathering views on our proposed legislative changes and how they will be implemented in practice, and whether any further legislative changes are required.

Special guardianship assessments

3.18 In addition to the legal changes we also believed it was necessary to make specific changes to the way Special Guardianship assessments are undertaken. We recognise that the majority of Special Guardianship placements are very strong and positive for children. However, the review of Special Guardianship generated compelling evidence that the assessment process for special guardians is not sufficiently robust. We need to ensure that children living under an SGO are safe, and that the placement gives them the best chance of good outcomes in their life.

3.19 That is why the government took immediate action to amend regulations and statutory guidance to require the local authority report to the court on potential special guardians to include:

- the capacity of the guardian to care for the child now and until the child is 18;
- the prospective special guardian's understanding of the child's current needs and likely future needs, particularly in light of any abuse or neglect the child has previously suffered, and their ability to meet those needs;
- the prospective special guardian's understanding of any current or future risk posed by the child's birth parents, particularly around contact and their ability to manage this risk; and
- an assessment of the strength of the previous and current relationship between the child and the prospective guardian.

3.20 The revised regulations were laid in Parliament on 5 February 2016 and came into force on 29 February 2016. Details can be found at: [Revised Special Guardianship regulations](#).

(ii) Moving to a regionalised adoption system

3.21 Overall, the structure of the adoption system as it currently stands does not support the most effective delivery of services, nor does it allow the best possible practice to flourish.

3.22 There is little doubt that the adoption system has improved despite current structures. But we don't think we will see the scale of improvements we need without some reform of the way adoption as a whole is managed in England.

3.23 That is why we are committed to introducing Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs)²⁹, with all local authorities being part of one by the end of this Parliament, operating across boundaries to ensure maximum choice for children, and with Voluntary Adoption Agencies at their heart. RAAs will increase the scale at which the system operates, creating a structure in which strategic recruitment, matching and commissioning of adoption support can all be improved. Establishing RAAs will also help spread excellent practice and innovation. We believe that they will provide us with an excellent platform to trial radical new approaches and to drive improvements across the system.

²⁹ [Regionalising Adoption, June 2015](#)

3.24 By 2020, we want a vibrant adoption system that is made up of a smaller number of more diverse agencies that work effectively across boundaries to match children with the best parents for them, and provide the quality support that we know families need. In this system:

- all local authorities will be part of a RAA or will have delegated their adoption functions to a RAA;
- RAAs will be responsible for the delivery of all recruitment, matching and support functions on behalf of local authorities, unless there is an exceptional reason, and many may also carry out additional functions, such as support provision for SGOs;
- VAAs will have a central role to play – not only as providers of adopters, providers of services and management or practice leaders within RAAs, but also as individual players in a continuing national market;
- innovation and excellence in practice, including early placement, will be widespread, leading to reduced delay for children, higher quality decision making, and higher quality adoption support;
- adopters will be regularly consulted by their RAAs and their input will help drive improvements in adoption services: from recruitment through to adoption support; and
- a clear accountability framework will drive the best outcomes from all agencies.

3.25 We are absolutely committed to working with the sector to ensure that, where possible, all local authorities move to RAAs voluntarily and in a way that works for them and for the overall national response to the needs of our most vulnerable children. If some local authorities fail to do so by 2017, we will consider using the powers in the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to require them to make arrangements for their adoption functions to be carried out by a RAA. We do not expect all local authorities to have fully transitioned to RAAs by this time, but would like to see effective plans and proposals in place. Where this is not happening, we will consider using the powers. We will of course consult all affected agencies before making any decisions.

How we will support the transition to Regional Adoption Agencies

3.26 To support the transition to RAAs, we will provide up to £14m across 2016-18 to local authorities and VAAs to develop and implement regional agencies, via:

- an RAA development fund, available to ongoing and new RAA project partnerships to support the development and implementation of RAA plans; and

- continued support from a centrally-procured delivery partner, available to support, challenge and coach RAA partnerships.

(iii) Developing the workforce

3.27 The government is committed to raising the quality of children’s social work across the board, and clarifying social workers’ responsibilities in supporting vulnerable children. Our wider social work reforms focus on the development of social workers over the course of their professional journey, from frontline practitioner to practice supervisor and then to practice leader, with a focus on the knowledge and skills required at all levels. This is part of a radical shift toward a practice-focused system that builds on the excellent practice already demonstrated by many talented social workers across England. It will result in a stronger workforce that is able to deliver improved outcomes for children and families.

3.28 In relation to adoption, developing the workforce is crucial to achieving sustainable success across the system. High quality social workers – including their ability successfully to undertake complex assessment, analysis and decision making is pivotal to a successful adoption system. Therefore we need to ensure social workers are supported to develop the knowledge and skills required in this specific area, to make the right permanence decision for every child, whether that decision is for adoption or another placement option.

3.29 Our vision for 2020 is of a system in which decisions about what is best for children who cannot be looked after by their parents are made robustly, swiftly and with confidence, by members of a highly skilled professional workforce who present comprehensive evidence and analysis of options, including in court. If a decision for adoption has been made, the adoption plan should be progressed swiftly by social workers driven by a sense of urgency and a refusal to tolerate damaging delay for the children in their care.

3.30 To achieve this, we need to support child and family social workers to develop the knowledge and skills which will enable them to:

- decide on the best permanence option for a child, based on a thorough knowledge of the evidence base for each option and understand the impact of delay on a child’s life chances;
- negotiate the legal process, including preparing thorough assessments and presenting these convincingly in court;
- identify a suitable permanent carer or arrangement, treating potential carers respectfully, providing a high quality service and being mindful of unconscious bias in decision making; and

- support families in transition to new placement arrangements and beyond, both in terms of direct work and the commissioning of services.

3.31 The knowledge and skills statement for all frontline practitioners, practice supervisors and practice leaders published to date, and the assessment and accreditation system currently being designed, focus on developing a common set of knowledge and skills and clear career pathway for social workers. These are essential to social workers working in adoption and making permanence decisions. In addition to this, we are keen to explore the specific practice knowledge and skills required in particular areas of child and family social work, as a way of helping social workers to develop depth of practice in key areas.

3.32 Therefore we will develop a robust programme to support social workers to develop or sharpen skills they need in order to make and support robust permanence decisions. We will develop training that will be recognised as the gold standard in this area across the system. The training will cover the knowledge and skills essential to social workers when making decisions to support children achieve permanence. This will set out what a child and family social worker needs to know and be able to do in order to successfully undertake the complex assessment, analysis and permanence decision making we require of them, and progress permanence plans with urgency and skill.

3.33 We will set up an expert working group to help us develop the content and delivery method for this programme with the aim of starting roll out during 2017.

3.34 The programme is likely to focus on:

- improving the quality of permanence assessments of both children and carers;
- enabling more robust and evidence-based decisions between different permanence options;
- building skills to ensure that court material is well prepared and clearly argued, and developing social workers' skills in presenting and defending cases in court effectively;
- improving the direct work skills necessary to prepare children for permanence and undertake high quality life story work, and training carers in appropriate re-parenting and therapeutic strategies;
- commitment to delivering a professional and high quality service where all parties are treated with respect;
- ensuring pragmatic and timely matching decisions, where the impact of delay is well understood and there is recognition of how unconscious bias can effect decision making; and

- improving the support provided to carers post placement, the diagnosis of support needs and the skills for the commissioning and/ - or delivery of support.

Chapter 4: Excellent practice everywhere

4.1 In the previous chapter, we set out the changes we plan to make to redesign and support the foundations on which the adoption system is built. We will change the legal framework in which adoption decisions are made, establish new Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) to deliver adoption services, and improve the skills and knowledge of the adoption workforce.

4.2 This chapter sets out what we will do, with those building blocks in place, to drive the transformation of front line practice, and bring about a step change in the quality and impact of adoption services across the country.

Delivering practice, innovation, and whole-process redesign through RAAs & VAAs

4.3 We are clear that structural change will not transform practice on its own. We want Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) to ensure they plan for how moving to a new delivery model will enable excellent practice to flourish, as well as increasing scale. Practice innovation must be at the heart of this transition. There is a real opportunity to redesign the way we do things and to spread existing excellent practice across all adoption functions to ensure we are delivering the best services for our most vulnerable children.

4.4 Given their longstanding specialist expertise and history of successful innovation and excellence, we want VAAs to lead the way in ensuring practice excellence is at the heart of the move to RAAs, and we will support them to do so.

4.5 To support innovation further we will also work with RAA projects to identify unhelpful bureaucratic rules and regulations that are standing in the way. Where there is a clear rationale, we will consider giving individual RAAs the flexibility to suspend regulations for a trial period, to test new and better ways of working. RAA projects should approach us with ideas and we can agree the best way forward.

4.6 To support the spreading and development of excellent practice in RAAs and on a national scale, we will introduce two new funding streams totalling up to £16 million over 2016-18. In addition to the financial support for the development of RAAs, outlined in Chapter 3, we will establish:

- a practice and innovation fund that will support RAA projects and individual VAAs and voluntary organisations to develop and deliver new ways of working, or to expand the reach of existing effective practice; and

- a VAA capacity building fund that will support the voluntary sector to strengthen its position as key players in RAAs, but also as individuals in a diverse national market.

4.7 In relation to redesigning practice the sorts of projects we would be interested to include (but not limited to):

- redesigning the adoption process from end to end, focussed around the child's experience and eradicating delay. This could involve removing steps that don't add value, or introducing new and more effective ways of working at various stages;
- embedding proven innovations at scale, for example scaling up a Concurrent Planning Service; and
- trialling a new innovation across an RAA, for example: new approaches to adopter-led matching; new approaches to the way social work and non-social work staff are organised and used within the organisation; new approaches to making matching decisions; or new approaches to post-adoption support.

Developing the national matching infrastructure

4.8 RAAs will provide a more suitable and efficient scale for the operation of adoption services, but there will still be a crucial need for a national infrastructure for recruitment, matching and support.

4.9 This is for two reasons:

- there are, of course, some children for whom even an RAA's larger pool of adopters will not suffice. Social workers will be expected to identify these children quickly and act promptly; and
- we need a diverse market where adopters still have choice, and diversity of provision still drives improvement and innovation.

4.10 We have already worked with the sector to increase substantially the number and range of opportunities that are available to help agencies recruit and match children and adopters who are not within the same agency. These include First4Adoption including its new e-learning functionality, National Adoption Week and the Adoption Register, Adoption Activity Days and National Exchange Days, each of which allows children to be matched with potential adopters on a national basis by initiating matches which would otherwise not be achieved. AdoptionLink has also grown rapidly over the last two years, and has enabled over 550 matches through adopter led links. It is crucial that this national matching infrastructure is maintained. We also want to see the development of

more innovation in matching and, within this, the voluntary sector developing their national offer, either through new ways of working or through targeted projects, particularly for harder to place children and for early placement.

4.11 We will also ensure that inter-agency placements operate swiftly and fairly. An inter-agency fee is paid from a local authority to another adoption agency whenever a local authority places a child with adopters who were assessed and approved by another local authority or a VAA. This is a crucial, non-profit making mechanism that enables swift matching of children across boundaries, and supports the excellent recruitment practice we see in many local authorities and VAAs across the country.

4.12 The scheme currently in place pays centrally the inter-agency fee for harder to place children (sibling groups, disabled children, black and minority ethnic children). This scheme has already had a significant impact – it has been used to support the placement of 572 children with claims worth £13.09m from 116 local authorities in the first two quarters alone. Given the promising early impact of this scheme, we now intend to continue to pay this fee until at least July 2016, when we will have gathered further evidence of impact to be able to make a decision on the future of the fund.

Speeding up stable placements by use of early placement schemes

4.13 We have challenged local authorities to double the number of children placed with their new adoptive families at the earliest possible point – halving the time they are waiting in care for the full process to be completed. This is when children are cared for by foster carers who will go on to adopt them if adoption is decided to be the best option for the child. It means children avoid delay while waiting for decisions about family reunification, and court processes, to be finalised: if the decision is not for adoption, the child has benefited from a high quality temporary placement, and if the decision is to adopt, the child has the benefit of having already lived with their adopter.

4.14 Early placement can be transformative for children. However, to work well for children, adopters, and birth parents, it needs to follow the best, tested practice to support everybody involved.

4.15 To support local authorities in this, we will develop and spread best practice to increase the use of early placement, working with experts in the field. We will also ensure early placement practice is embedded within RAAs, by prioritising this within our practice and innovation fund.

Improving support for adopters in a regionalised system

4.16 The majority of adopted children will have experienced neglect or abuse in their early childhood, which will often cause enduring problems such as attachment disorders or challenging behaviour. Adoption support is therefore an area that deserves particular focus, as good, timely support can make the difference to whether an adoptive family thrives or struggles. A key goal of regionalising adoption is improving the adoption support offer across the country and ensuring high quality services are available everywhere. This section sets out how we see that happening, but also points to some further targeted activity we think is necessary to drive improvement in this area.

4.17 The introduction of RAAs offers an opportunity radically to improve adoption support. RAAs will be better placed to develop an overarching understanding of their adopter populations support needs and to strategically plan and commission support. By 2020 we expect RAAs to have:

- regular contact with adopters who live in their area, to understand their needs and provide regular information on the support they can provide;
- staff with the skills and capacity in their workforce to undertake high quality adoption support assessments, including in partnership with health colleagues where specialist mental health assessments are required;
- strong partnership working with local health commissioners and providers, including delivering local transformation plans to implement proposals set out in the *Future in Mind* report (2015);³⁰
- systems and processes in place to make use of the Adoption Support Fund to provide therapeutic support where this meets a family's need;
- good commissioning processes in place with adoption support providers to enable them to expand to meet local needs;
- processes in place to listen to the views of adopted children and young people. enabling their voice to be heard on their individual support and to influence wider service design; and
- strong partnership working arrangements with local schools through virtual school heads and designated teachers.

³⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-mental-health-services-for-young-people>

Adoption Support Fund

4.18 The £19 million Adoption Support Fund, rolled out nationally in May 2015, has helped many adoptive families obtain the support they need. Over £16 million has been allocated to support more than 4,700 families, funding specialist assessments, various forms of therapeutic support and short breaks. In January 2016 we extended the scope of the fund so families can receive support as soon as adopted children are placed with them. Over the next four years we will:

- increase the ASF in 2016-17 to £21m and £28m in 2017-18, with further increases in every year in this Parliament;
- extend support to adopted young people up to age 21 (from April 2016);
- allow children adopted from other countries via intercountry adoptions to use the ASF (from April 2016); and
- extend support to special guardians who care for children who were previously looked after (from April 2016).

4.19 We will explore with key partners how the ASF can become sustainable in the future, with contributions from central and local government; health service; and private and charitable organisations. We will also explore how we can develop the operation of the ASF to use the funding available as effectively as possible, such as national block purchasing of types of therapies or support, or potentially having regional ASFs linked to RAAs.

Strengthening the evidence base on ‘what works’

4.20 As the provision of support services develops across the country, we need to strengthen the evidence base of ‘what works’ in terms of preventive and therapeutic adoption support. This will build on the independent evidence review of post adoption support interventions carried out by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. This work will be in partnership with the Department of Health and supported by an ASF Research Steering Group, made up of voluntary sector, health and research partners. We will also continue to work with other stakeholders and adopters to identify research gaps and proposals to address those gaps.

Developing specialist mental health provision for adopted children

4.21 The DfE will work closely with the Department of Health (DH) and NHS England on the transformation of mental health services for children and young people as set out in the *Future in Mind* report (2015).³¹ This will include:

- By summer 2016 setting up an expert group to advise DfE and DH ministers on new care pathways for adopted and looked after children. These will set out best practice to be followed in the treatment/support of these children. The experts will be drawn from across the health, social care and education sectors, with input from children, young people, carers and families with experience of the care system; and
- Exploring, with NHS England and other key stakeholders, options for developing models of care to meet the mental health needs of adopted children, along with other vulnerable groups. This will include assessing whether centres of excellence would improve access and support, taking into account the importance of local delivery, and how those centres would link to RAAs.

Improving the capacity of early years and education professionals to meet the needs of adopted children

4.22 Educational attainment is critical to children's long term outcomes, but despite the entitlements we have given adopted children, many still struggle to achieve highly and make expected progress at school.

4.23 Getting a good start is crucial. Adopted children aged 2 years old can get free early education and childcare. For adopted children aged 3-and 4-years old the early years pupil premium (EYPP) gives providers of early years education extra funding to support them. We will identify and spread good practice in early years settings. We will also develop a guide for early years professionals working with adopted children.

4.24 For school-age adopted children we will:

- Use legislation to expand the role of virtual schools heads and consider how designated teachers can continue to support children who have left care under an adoption order;
- encourage and spread best practice around the use of Pupil Premium Plus to maximise the educational outcomes of adopted children;

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-mental-health-services-for-young-people>

- support voluntary sector organisations to develop and highlight effective practice including raising awareness and understanding in schools;
- develop guides on education for adopted children for schools and parents;
and
- explore including 'understanding the impact of trauma and loss on children's ability to learn' in initial teacher training.

Chapter 5: Sharpening accountability to ensure delivery

5.1 The previous chapters have described fundamental reform of the building blocks of the adoption system, and a renewed focus on excellent practice and innovation in the delivery of adoption services. Making sure we have the right accountability and performance management systems in place will be crucial to making a reality of these ambitions.

Accountability under the reformed system

5.2 We set out in *Children's social care reform – a vision for change* (2016) how we want to see all children's social care organisations being well governed and held intelligently to account.³²

5.3 In recent years we have seen the emergence of new organisational and geographical models of delivery, such as Children's Social Care Trusts and the new 'combined authority' model. The development of RAAs is another example of this kind of structural innovation, with the potential to create more appropriate conditions for excellent practice and innovation to flourish.

5.4 Our plans to regionalise adoption services of course put this sector at the leading edge of innovative new delivery models for children's social care services. However, the development of new delivery structures means reconsidering the way that adoption services are held to account. Clear and effective accountability needs to be central to a regionalised system to ensure it is delivering the best services for some of our most vulnerable children.

5.5 High quality and relevant data should be at the centre of accountability. Therefore we will develop a clear set of meaningful data to monitor the performance of RAAs including a focus on the timeliness and performance for harder to place children as key indicators, and a greater emphasis on adoption support. We will set out this data in new RAA 'scorecards' to ensure clear accountability.

5.6 Ofsted will also continue to have a key role inspecting adoption services. We are working closely with Ofsted to design a new approach which is appropriate in a regionalised system. We are clear that local authorities, voluntary and regional adoption agencies will all need to be inspected in some way, but recognise that it would be

³² [Children's social care reform: a vision for change, January 2016](#)

disproportionate for the regional adoption agency to be inspected every time one of the local authorities involved is inspected.

5.7 It is important, however, that a link is made so that local authorities are held to account on how they are overseeing and managing the performance of their regional adoption agencies in a way that ensures the best possible outcomes for local children.

5.8 We also want to see a revised inspection framework which supports strong innovation and evidence based practice. We have started to discuss this with Ofsted and would welcome views from local authority and voluntary sector partners on how best to achieve our vision.

The ongoing role of the Adoption Leadership Board

5.9 After nearly 18 months the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) is an established part of the adoption system landscape – an innovative example of sector leadership informed and supported with a robust dataset, a strong and respected chair and commitment from ministers and policy makers. There is a good tradition of radical, open policy-making on adoption – notably the development of a new adopter approval process by system leaders in 2012.

5.10 The government now aims to embed its adoption reform programme through a new policy focus on regionalisation and service consolidation – in a challenging context for local government and the voluntary adoption sector. This means that maximising momentum from the sector for implementation is essential.

5.11 Therefore we will strengthen the role of the ALB to ensure it is having maximum impact across its functions, which are to:

- collect and analyse data to inform, support and challenge policy makers and national leaders;
- engage regional leaders in policy questions and provide visible system leadership;
- support regional leaders in the implementation of the adoption reform agenda; and
- share good practice in implementing the reforms – particularly on regionalisation and service consolidation – and perhaps publish opinions and guidance where helpful.

The role of adopter voice as a driver of reform

5.12 Adopters are best placed to understand the needs of their children and their insight is invaluable in shaping the services they use. The views and experiences of adopted children and young people also need to be understood and taken into account. Supporting local authorities to engage more effectively with adoptive families is a key plank in government policy for improving adoption services.

5.13 We want to see local partnership that recognises and builds on parents' expertise, where professionals and parents really listen to and learn from each other in ways that are valued and adopted children are supported and encouraged to contribute. Adoptive parents must be more than a sounding board, but influence the decision making of professionals. If adoptive parents are working in true partnership with organisations they need to be part of the decision-making processes that shape and build the services they access.

5.14 We want adoption services which respond to:

- individual choices and people's real life complex needs and give adopters the power of choice about what services they receive and how they receive them; and
- the voice of local adopters and children and young people on how improvements in the quality and timeliness of adoption services can be obtained.

5.15 To ensure this, we have established an expert advisory group specifically to inform adoption support policy; and we are supporting the voluntary sector organisation to build on their work in this area. In particular:

- Adoption UK will establish an Adoption Support User Group, made up of Adoption UK adopter champions and adopters from the Adoption Support Expert Advisory Group to inform the development of national adoption policy and programmes. The group will meet quarterly with officials and annually with the Minister for Children and Families;
- Adoption UK will provide support to the partnerships of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies as they transition to regional adoption agencies, ensuring that adopter voice is embedded within development and implementation plans; and
- Coram will extend the work of 'The Adoptables' to promote the views and experiences of young people who are adopted. After Adoption's TALKadoption project will help adopted young people to get together and

talk about what adoption is like for them and how support can be improved.
These projects will help inform the development of government policy.

Conclusion: Delivering the vision

Our commitments

The next four years offer an exciting opportunity to reshape adoption and, in doing so, make sure we deliver for adopted children and their families. To deliver our vision, we are committed to the following:

Legislative changes

- Legislating to ensure quality and stability of care are prioritised and properly considered.

Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA)

- Providing funding and support via a RAA development fund, with up to £14m available across 2016-18 to support the implementation of RAAs; and
- Continuing support from a centrally-procured delivery partner, to assist, challenge and coach RAA partnerships.

Workforce

- Developing a robust continuous professional development programme to enable social workers to develop the skills they need to make and support robust permanence decisions.
- Setting up an Expert Working Group to help us develop the content and delivery method for a CPD programme for roll out from April 2017.
- Undertaking a formal consultation of the proposed knowledge and skills statement for social workers whose job is achieving permanence in summer 2016.

Research

- Commissioning an independent summary of the relevant research evidence, for use by local authority managers, social workers and judges, which focuses on comparative outcomes of different placement options.

Inter-agency fee

- Continuing to pay the inter-agency fee until July 2016 when we will review the position.

Early placement

- Developing and spreading best practice to increase the use of early placement, working with experts in the field.

Innovation and practice excellence

- Introducing two new funding streams for RAAs, voluntary adoption agencies and voluntary organisations, with up to £16 million across 2016-18.

Adoption support

- Increasing the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) in 2016-17 to £21 million and to £28 million in 2017-18.
- Extending ASF support from April 2016 to adopted young people up to age 21; to children adopted from care in other countries via intercountry adoptions; and to special guardians who care for children who were previously looked after.
- Strengthening the evidence base of 'what works' in terms of therapeutic adoption support.

Mental Health

- Setting up an expert group to advise Department for Education and Department of Health ministers on new care pathways for adopted and looked after children.
- Developing models of care to meet the mental health needs of adopted children, and other vulnerable groups.

Education

- Use legislation to expand the role of virtual schools heads and consider how designated teachers can continue to support children who have left care under an adoption order.
- Encouraging and spreading best practice in the use of Pupil Premium Plus.
- Supporting voluntary sector organisations to develop and highlight effective practice in schools.
- Considering including 'understanding the impact of trauma and loss on children's ability to learn' in initial teacher training.

Next steps

We are keen to hear views on these proposals. The Adoption Leadership Board will be asking Regional Adoption Boards to discuss the details set out above during March and April, and feed back views to the Board in advance of their next meeting.

In parallel, we would be keen to hear the views of Local Family Justice Boards and will collate these via the national Family Justice Board.

We will later this year consult on the continuous professional development and the knowledge and skills statement proposals before moving ahead with commissioning and roll out.

Finally, adopters are best placed to understand the needs of their children; and their insight is invaluable in shaping the services they use and telling us whether we are getting it right. We have brought adopters into national policy making through an expert advisory group, and are providing funding to develop adopter voice groups in new RAAs. We would welcome views from adopters and have asked Adoption UK, who sit on the Adoption Leadership Board, to collect and collate feedback.



Department
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