



Nadhim Zahawi MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Directors of Children's Services,
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Dear Colleagues

I would like to update you about progress on the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) programme and to provide feedback from our recent conversations with all developing projects. Thank you to all these projects for taking the time to participate in this 'checkpoint' process.

Good progress is being made towards the Government's expectation that all local authorities become part of an RAA by 2020. We now have 12 live projects covering a third of local authorities and another 18 scheduled to go live between April and June 2020. This is a huge achievement and reflects a tremendous amount of hard work and commitment across local authorities and partners to put in place the best services possible for children and families affected by adoption. Officials are working with the small number of local authorities yet to join the programme, and I look forward to receiving an update on their progress by the end of April.

In November last year, the first cohort of RAA leaders began the RAA leadership and development programme; a second cohort will begin later in the year. The RAA leaders' group meets regularly to discuss system wide issues and to work through challenges.

What progress has been made in regionalising adoption?

Almost all local authorities are now involved in an RAA project. While it is still early days, a range of qualitative data is becoming available, from Ofsted inspections and the Inception and Scoping Report from Ecorys UK / the Hadley Centre. The latter found that there are early signs of positive adopter feedback, and improved adopter recruitment. Linked to this, some RAAs have been able to improve the support for adopters.

During the checkpoint process, developing projects shared with us their approach to designing recruitment, matching and support services. Based on what we have learnt from these conversations, and from the 12 established RAAs, there are a number of approaches that some or many RAAs are adopting that I would encourage all projects to follow. Our experience is that these should help to support effective RAAs which maximise their positive impact on children and families:

- The evidence suggests that the best performance is to be had where RAAs are involved at the earliest stages in “permanency” planning for children where adoption is a possibility, and that they are helping many local authorities improve the quality of this vital work to enable them to develop strategies for targeting adopter recruitment.
- The best match for a child can be secured most quickly where RAAs have mechanisms in place to purchase inter-agency placements promptly, and where a national search takes place as early as possible. Some RAAs include Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA) partners at matching panels.
- The adoption support offer is effective where this is provided from the first point of contact and there is strong partnership working with health and education colleagues.
- RAAs are developing a thorough understanding of the quality of local services and tell us that this helps them to work with partners to design their commissioning strategy.
- RAAs and local providers say that stability of provision helps to plan support services; an important element in this is ensuring that payments are made promptly for support or other services provided by other agencies. Late payments have a serious impact on cash flow for VAA's which can destabilise even well established agencies. The Government has issued guidelines on prompt (within 30 days) payments to SME's from all government agencies which we would expect RAA's to be able to meet too.
- To help support innovation, agencies from the voluntary sector are engaged with the planning, both in the development phase of the project and after the RAA has gone live.

During the checkpoint conversations, several projects asked for information on:

- The future of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF). The Secretary of State announced in December 2018 £6m additional funding for the current year and an additional £6m for 2019-2020; we want RAAs to maximise their use of the ASF. The Government will continue to work closely with the sector to consider long-term children's services funding as part of the 2019 Spending Review, when the government will set out its long-term spending approach.
- What delivery models are acceptable to DfE. The criteria are attached. The model agreed by RAAs will depend on local circumstances and the particular local authorities involved. However, in order to secure the benefits we are seeing from regionalisation, it is important that the new agency is in a position to act as a single entity on behalf of the individual authorities. The RAA should be responsible for delivering or commissioning the core functions - recruitment, matching and support, underpinned with a pooled

budget - and have in place a single line of accountability to enable prompt decision-making.

We are looking at comments from projects during the checkpoint process about future learning and development needs and the policy team is working with our delivery partner to develop the next phase of these opportunities; they will share these with you as soon as possible.

Once again, I am grateful for your time in the checkpoint process and your ongoing commitment to delivering better outcomes for children.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Zahawi', written in a cursive style.

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