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Inter-agency Adoption and the Government's Subsidy of the Inter- Agency Fee

Research report

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Executive Summary

Inter-agency Adoption and the Government's Subsidy of the Inter-Agency Fee

When the plan for a “looked after” child is adoption, it is important to reduce unnecessary delay in the adoption process. One reason for delay is that local authorities (LAs) may not have prospective adopters who can meet a child’s needs amongst their “in-house” adopters (that is adopters the LA has recruited and approved). Suitable adopters may be available through other LAs or voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs), but this comes with an associated inter-agency fee where the LAs responsible for the child must pay the adopters’ agency a minimum fee of £27,000 (costs are higher for sibling groups) in order to compensate for the cost of adopter recruitment, assessment and support. A reluctance to pay this fee may act as a barrier to inter-agency placements, affecting particularly those whose characteristics make them ‘harder to place’ (HTP).

In response to these concerns, the government began subsidising the inter-agency fee for a fixed period for all children defined as ‘harder to place’ in July 2015, in order to encourage LAs to consider more inter-agency matches and potentially reduce waiting times for children. The groups of children considered within this initiative as ‘harder to place’ are those aged 5 or older, disabled children, children who need to be placed with one or more siblings, children with a black or minority ethnic background (BME) and children who have been waiting over 18 months from entry into care to placement. This intervention aimed to encourage more (and speedier) matches to be made across a wider range of agencies, and to foster the development of new partnerships between LAs and VAAs. This study investigated how this subsidy of the inter-agency fee was working within the broader context of adoption family finding activities.

Aims of the study

The overarching aim was to assess the impact of the government’s decision to pay the inter-agency fee for a fixed term in order to better understand the barriers and enablers that affect the adoption opportunities for harder to place children. The research questions were:

1. What are the perceptions of professionals and adopters about the key issues in finding homes for harder to place children, including how inter-agency placements are used and funded?
2. Did the government payment of the inter-agency fee help local authorities to make matches for children who are ‘harder to place’ and what, if any, changes have there

been in local authority behaviours whilst the inter-agency fee was being paid by the government?

3. What effect has the government payment of the inter-agency fee had on local authority and voluntary adoption agencies, both individually and in terms of how these agencies work with each other?

Methodology

This study was carried out in collaboration with 7 LAs (3 unitary authorities, 2 metropolitan boroughs and 2 county authorities) and local branches of 3 national VAAs. These agencies were spread across the North and South of England.

The study used a mix of methods and included four strands of work:

- A quantitative analysis of child level data for 500 children with a placement order made between April 2014 and March 2016
- In-depth interviews with 10 adoption agency managers (7 from LAs and 3 from VAAs).
- Six focus groups with adoption professionals (in three LAs and three VAAs) and five focus groups with approved adopters (in three VAAs and two LAs).
- Telephone interviews with family finding social workers for 35 individual cases (some individual children and some sibling groups).

Key findings

Defining 'harder to place': adopter preferences and children's needs

The study explored the concept of 'harder to place' with both social workers and adopters. Professionals agreed that children included in the subsidy criteria were harder to place, but felt that these criteria were not sufficiently wide-ranging. Other factors that were identified were developmental uncertainties (including uncertainties about genetic inheritance risks and pre-natal exposure to alcohol), and children who have (or might have) experienced sexual abuse. For adopters, health and development problems that may affect a child's capacity to reach independence in adulthood, and aggressive behaviours, were seen as the factors most likely to deter adopters; however, they emphasised that it was the severity of children's problems rather than the category that was more important.

Professionals participating in the study perceived a mis-match between what waiting adopters were able to offer and the needs of children waiting for a match, and at the time of the study, all agencies reported that new recruitment was focused primarily on

recruiting families able to consider the groups of children who had more complex matching considerations. The qualities that family finders were looking for in such families were resilience, a willingness to accept uncertainty and the capacity to provide therapeutic parenting. Adopters felt that their willingness to consider parenting a hard to place child could be increased by training and education, working with the social worker, gaining experience with children, meeting experienced adopters, and learning more about individual children. Both adopters and social workers agreed that a balance needs to be struck between adopters being open-minded and being realistic.

Inter-agency matches and supporting inter-agency placements

Overwhelmingly there was a preference for in-house placements wherever possible, although professionals did not link this to financial reasons. Professionals' experiences of joint working were mixed and it was clear that good experiences with another agency could encourage further joint working whilst poor experiences made LAs wary of any future involvement. Participants' concerns about inter-agency matches were focused around issues of communication, coordination, information sharing, professional relationships, and trust between agencies – particularly where large geographical distances were involved. For both adopters and professionals, concerns about the support available to children in inter-agency placements loomed large, particularly in relation to the ability of children's social workers to visit and support as needed and the availability (and quality) of support services local to the family. The Adoption Support Fund was viewed positively but some participants reported having experienced difficulties in accessing this in a timely way and some raised issues about the variability of financial support packages available for adopters.

The timeliness of matches

Although speed of matching had increased during the period when the subsidy was available, it is not possible to say this was a direct result of the subsidy. Other factors may also have had an effect including: changes to practice in response to other drivers prior to the introduction of the subsidy; a drop in the numbers of children with placement orders meaning LAs may have been more able to focus on waiting children; Link Maker became established as a routinely used family finding resource¹.

The quantitative analysis of child level data found that the average time taken to identify a match was significantly shorter during the subsidy period than it had been in the preceding year and a greater proportion of children, both harder to place and non-harder

¹ Linkmaker is a social enterprise which provides a national online platform covering adoption, fostering, residential care and commissioning.

to place, were matched within 6 months of placement order. In-house matches were unsurprisingly swifter than external matches. The increase in timeliness observed in this study was also evidenced in the latest publication of ALB data (ALB, 2017b).

Changes in family finding practice

LA managers reported substantial changes in the way their agencies worked with, and for, children who had (or might have) a plan for adoption, which were attributed to changes made prior to the introduction of the subsidy. These changes included restructuring of teams and roles to permit a focus on family finding, the strengthening of care planning and monitoring to avoid drift for children (including the involvement of the adoption service in early planning), the early identification of children likely to need adoption, and the allocation of family finders to children earlier in the process. This early involvement of family finders was perceived as beneficial in both understanding the needs of the child and assisting with efficient care planning.

Participating LAs were at different stages in terms of embedding these restructuring processes but perceived them as having had a real impact on practice. However, these changes had been initiated prior to the introduction of the subsidy. The main drivers for change appeared to be adoption scorecards and the publication of timeliness data through the Adoption Leadership Board.

A sequential approach to family finding was described by managers and social workers: placements were first sought in house, then with agency partners / consortium members and finally using other agencies. Importantly though, this process was reported to happen very swiftly and the decision to search externally was often in place before a placement order had been made; as mentioned above, for most of our participating LAs this rapid process had been adopted *before* the subsidy was introduced.

Adoption managers emphasised the importance of a thorough and rigorous assessment of children's needs in achieving timely matches and in avoiding disruptions; they perceived that the turnover of children's social workers could affect this work. Link Maker, exchange days and activity days were all frequently mentioned as useful avenues, particularly for 'harder to place' children. Also important was simple communication with other agencies, be that formal or informal. Potentially avoidable delays could occur when there were uncertainties about plans (reflecting the need for sound assessments) and very significant periods of apparent delay could result when identified adopters subsequently withdrew from a match, or placements disrupted during or shortly after introductions. Overall participants felt that the quality of matches had not been affected negatively by the availability of the subsidy.

Most participating agencies said that the subsidy had not made much difference to the way they approached the family finding task, although for some it had made a big

difference, particularly in removing the need to seek higher management approval for external searches, enabling wider family finding to start immediately. However, the subsidy was appreciated by all agencies, and in some LAs these funds were directly supporting family finding activities (or other aspects of children's services).

Local authority and voluntary adoption agency relationships

The evidence from the study reveals little impact of the subsidy on the way that VAAs and LAs work together and overall this relatively brief and temporary initiative did not seem to be a strong factor in driving interagency collaborations. Some LAs had partnership arrangements with VAAs but these were in existence prior to the introduction of the subsidy. VAA managers also talked about their existing partnerships with a variety of LAs, but did not perceive an increase in links as a result of the subsidy (at least at the time that data collection took place). Some professionals felt the subsidy could have been better publicised to front line staff.

There was more discussion of LA and VAA relationships in the context of regionalisation and here it was clear that the issue of the inter-agency fee was complicating the process of forming meaningful partnerships between the two sectors. How the payment of inter-agency fees (the income from which is critical to VAAs) might work within the new regional structures seemed unclear, even at senior manager levels. A variety of potential models were discussed but our data indicated that the lack of clarity was a concern for VAA managers in particular. Some central guidance on how fees ought to be managed had been expected. Finding an effective solution to the issue of funding for VAAs if both sectors are to work together to find the best matches for children is clearly important.

Key recommendations for policy and practice

In terms of policy and the national overview the key recommendations are:

- It is important that timeliness continues to be monitored centrally, and at the LA level, in the post-subsidy period;
- Consideration should be given to ways of decreasing geographic variation in adoption support services, adoption allowances and financial support; and
- Consideration should be given to exploring the ways in which LAs make decisions about inter-agency placements, both in terms of budgetary planning and in individual cases.

For children's services departments and adoption teams:

- Preparation and training can help adopters to consider harder to place children, but this needs to include therapeutic parenting training;

- There needs to be flexibility in the 'advice' given in panel recommendations for adopters to allow for adopters extending their horizons post approval;
- LAs (and Regional Adoption Agencies in due course) should ensure that there are mechanisms to support strong links between adoption teams and children's social work teams in the early stages of planning for children at both practitioner and managerial levels. This will provide early alerts to adoption teams when external family finding may be needed;
- Where children have additional matching needs, consideration should be given to seeking the relevant permissions to begin family finding before a placement order is made;
- Family finding work needs to be undertaken by someone with a good knowledge of both the child and of family finding resources. Ideally a dedicated role;
- The implementation of formal mechanisms to monitor and promote timeliness should become routine practice within LAs;
- Workforce development is needed in order to ensure that thorough assessments of children's needs have been conducted and that planning is clear before family finding starts;
- In order to encourage appropriate adopter-initiated enquiries (and ensure that family finders are able to make informed decisions in a timely way) agencies need to find ways to ensure that information about both children's needs and adopters' capacities is provided in a way that is both accurate and easily accessible.
- Attention needs to be given to how trust can be built between agencies when children are to be placed out of area. This needs to include improving the quality and completeness of information sharing, effective coordination between agencies (including addressing issues of previous poor experience) and appropriate commitments to support which are subsequently fulfilled; and
 - The planning for effective social work support for children placed far from their local authority is a vital consideration within this.
- With the move to regionalisation of adoption agencies it is timely for the organisations involved in fee setting to consider how inter-agency fee structures should operate in the future.

Chapter 1. Background and Methodology

Adoption, for some looked after children, offers enhanced opportunities for positive outcomes over long-term foster care or other permanence alternatives (Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings 2014). However, there are continuing concerns about delay in the adoption process, particularly that some children identified as needing adoption are waiting too long to be matched and placed with a new family. Although the statistics produced by the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) for March 2015 (ALB, 2015a)², showed both a reduction (compared to the previous year) in the number of children with a placement order (PO) waiting for a match, and improvements in timeliness, at the time this study was commissioned 2,810 children with a PO were still waiting.

Whilst local authorities (LAs) can generally place babies and young children without complex needs quickly within their own authority, they usually find it much harder to identify a suitable family within their own pool of adopters (an 'in-house' match) for older children (those of school age), those who are in sibling groups, those who have a minority ethnic background or those who live with a disability or long term condition (Dance et al, 2010). Searching for an adoptive family for these groups of children usually requires professionals to consider a wider pool of approved adopters at the earliest opportunity (Farmer and Dance, 2015), and placing with another LA or voluntary adoption agency (VAA) in the same region or even nationally may be required (an inter-agency match). In such cases the placing LA has to pay the adopters' agency a fee to compensate for the cost of the adopter recruitment, assessment and support. The amount of the inter-agency fee³ is dependent on the number of children being placed with the adopter and at the time of writing these fees were set at:

1. £27,000 for placing 1 child
2. £43,000 for placing 2 siblings in 1 adoptive family
3. £60,000 for placing 3 siblings in 1 adoptive family
4. £68,000 for placing 4 siblings in 1 adoptive family
5. £80,000 for placing 5 or more siblings in 1 adoptive family

LAs in England vary in the extent to which they use inter-agency placements, and the point at which they consider seeking an inter-agency placement; reluctance to proceed swiftly to searching for a family from another agency has been associated with significant delays for children (Farmer and Dance, 2015).

² The Adoption Leadership Board compiles statistics from a quarterly survey of Local Authorities

³ In England the inter-agency fee is agreed between the Local Government Association (LGA), Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), and the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) UK. (see: <http://cvaa.org.uk/inter-agency-fees/>)

Even though it has been estimated that it costs LAs at least £27,000 to recruit, prepare, approve and support adoptive parents (Selwyn et al, 2009), the need to fund inter-agency fees can be one of the barriers to inter-agency placement, thus potentially delaying placements for children – particularly those whose characteristics make them ‘harder to place’ (Dance et al, 2010; Selwyn et al, 2009). In response to these concerns, the government began subsidising the inter-agency fee for a fixed period (one year) for all children falling into the ‘harder to place’⁴ category in 8 July 2015. The aim of this was to encourage LAs to consider more inter-agency matches and reduce the time children wait for a suitable adoptive placement. The government also hoped to encourage more (and faster) matches to be made across a wider range of agencies (Timpson, 2015).

This initiative came at a time when there had been substantial changes in adoption in England as part of an ongoing programme of ‘adoption reform’ (DfE, 2011 and 2013). These changes included the introduction of ‘adoption score cards’ (to monitor LA performance in timeliness in placing children for adoption and approving prospective adopters) and encouragement to increase the number of approved adopters. More recently, plans have been introduced for the development of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) to replace some of the 189 individual local authority and voluntary adoption agencies (DfE, 2015b).

1.1 Purpose of the research

The overarching aim of this research was to assess the impact of the government’s decision to pay the inter-agency fee for a fixed term, examining this issue in its broader context by considering other factors that may also impact on the timeliness of family finding for harder to place children. This report addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of professionals and adopters about the key issues in finding homes for harder to place children, including how inter-agency placements are used and funded?
2. Did the government payment of the inter-agency fee help local authorities to make matches for children who are ‘harder to place’ and what, if any, changes have there been in local authority behaviours whilst the inter-agency fee was being paid by the government?
3. What effect has the government payment of the inter-agency fee had on local authority and voluntary adoption agencies, both individually and in terms of how these agencies work with each other?

⁴ The groups of children considered within this initiative as ‘harder to place’ are those over four years old, children with a disability, children who need to be placed with one or more siblings, children with a black or minority ethnic background and children who have been waiting over 18 months since a PO was made.

1.2 Methodology

This research used a mix of methods and included 4 strands of work: a quantitative analysis of pseudonymised child level data provided by LAs; in-depth interviews with adoption agency managers; a series of focus groups with adoption team professionals and approved adopters; and in-depth case studies of children's family finding journeys through telephone interviews with their family finding social workers.

Selection and recruitment of sample agencies

The study involved 7 LAs and 3 VAAs. Local authorities were purposively selected to include a range in terms of agency type (2 metropolitan boroughs, 3 unitary councils and 2 county administrations) and the area of the country (4 in the north and 3 in the south). As we were interested in levels of adoption activity and early use of the subsidy, the research also drew on a mixture of data published by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) for 2014-15 (DfE, 2014 and 2015a; ALB, 2015 a and b). This allowed us to select agencies where the data indicated that significant proportions of their looked after children with POs were 'harder to place' and there were children who had been waiting more than 18 months for an adoptive placement.

Two of our VAAs were based in the north of England and one in the south, although all of the VAAs offered services in various parts of the country – and offered services beyond adopter recruitment and approval.

Methods

Strand 1. Quantitative analysis

An analysis of quantitative (pseudonymised) child-level data supplied by participating LAs was undertaken. The primary purpose was to identify whether there were differences in the time taken to match children with adopters before and after the subsidy was introduced. Data for 500 children with a PO made between April 2014 and March 2016 were included in the main analysis. Not all agencies were able to provide all the information, or always provide it in the format requested. However, every precaution was taken to minimise errors and it has been possible to address the relevant research questions.

Strand 2. In-depth interviews with adoption agency managers

Ten semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were undertaken with adoption managers (7 LA managers, 3 VAA managers); all were recorded and transcribed. The seniority of the managers varied: some managed larger parts of the service and others managed just the adoption team. The interviews explored the structure of the service and the team, how family finding operated, the impact of the subsidy (and the inter-agency fee), adopter recruitment, and organisational structures and relationships with other agencies.

Strand 3. Focus groups with adoption professionals and approved adopters

Eleven focus groups were convened, 6 with adoption professionals (in 3 LAs and 3 VAAs) and 5 with approved/about to be approved adopters (in 3 VAAs and 2 LAs). All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The purposes of the professionals' focus groups were to: understand more about the experience of family finding for harder to place children; learn more about the barriers to, and enablers for, inter-agency placements; explore the issue of fees and the subsidy; and consider the issue of adopter 'preferences' (in terms of the characteristics of children they felt able to parent) and 'stretching' (i.e. how initial preferences could be widened). Thirty-two people took part in one of the 6 professionals' focus groups; most worked in adoption teams but in some agencies children's social workers from permanence teams were also represented. Participants varied in level of seniority and years of experience in adoption work.

In total, 24 adopters took part in one of 5 focus groups. Participants included adopters at all stages of their adoption journey from a few waiting for their approval panel date to some who had recently had a child placed with them. Although those already parenting an adopted child were in the minority, for the ease of writing, all focus group participants will be described as "adopters" except where it is necessary for clarity to distinguish between the different groups. These focus groups explored adopters' experience of the recruitment, approval and family finding process and how their 'preferences' had changed as they went through this process. There was also some discussion about inter-agency placements and fees although adopters' experiences of these were limited.

Strand 4. In depth case studies with family finding social workers

Interviews were undertaken with the family finders for a total of 35 cases (some individual children and some sibling groups) in order to gain a deeper understanding of what had happened to accelerate or delay progression to a match for these children. Cases were selected from datasets provided for strand 1. Selection focused on children in the 'harder to place' groups and included some children who had been placed with their adoptive families very swiftly and others who seemed to have been waiting a long time. The interviews were recorded for reference purposes but analysis was based on contemporaneous researcher notes.

Analysis

The management of the quantitative datasets for strand 1 involved calculating the length of time between the making of a PO and a match being agreed for each child (or the time since the making of the PO where no match was identified). The average time taken before the subsidy was introduced was compared to average times during the subsidy period. Strands 2 and 3 produced qualitative data which was transcribed verbatim and strand 4 a mix of pre-coded and narrative responses which were captured for analysis through researchers making contemporaneous notes. The qualitative data (be that

verbatim or from notes) was analysed thematically but within a framework that was guided by the research objectives using a mixture of top down and bottom up coding.

Ethical issues and processes

The main ethical issues in this study were associated with accessing sensitive child-level data. We put in place stringent measures to manage these activities without breaching data protection protocols. With regard to the direct participation of individuals, information about the study was provided through the participating agency ahead of any data collection event and participants gave their informed consent to take part. We agreed with the Department for Education that the identities of participating agencies would remain anonymous to all except the research team. All data received or generated by the study has been stored and shared between researchers securely throughout the life of the project.

The research was considered and approved by the ethics committees of each of the 3 universities involved, by the Department for Education Ethics Board and by research governance or ethics committees as required by participating agencies.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Strengths

Findings were informed from a wide variety of sources: local authority records, senior managers, social workers and adoptive parents. Different types of adoption agency were represented, and agencies were spread widely across England. This study provides a snapshot of a range of issues in contemporary adoption at a time of great change in the field, setting the issue of the inter-agency fee within a much broader context.

Limitations

The participating agencies are only a small sub sample of all adoption agencies in England. Although agencies were sampled purposefully, they may not represent adoption practices on a national scale. The findings of the study concerning individual cases represent only a snapshot in time. We do not know from our data what has happened since matches were identified. Moreover, the study took place at a time when a number of things were happening in adoption practice which means that, while improvements in timeliness for children were identified, these improvements cannot definitively be attributed to the availability of the subsidy.

1.3 Layout of the report

The report presents findings from the study as relevant to the research questions outlined above. Chapter 2 considers key issues in family finding for children who are 'harder to place' and chapter 3 reflects on changes in timeliness, changes in practice, the subsidy and the fee. The final chapter summarises and contextualises the key findings of the research and outlines the implications for policy and practice.

Chapter 2. Key issues in family finding for ‘harder to place’ children

The subsidy focused on reimbursing LAs for the cost of inter-agency placements for particular groups of children considered to be ‘harder to place’, these groups being older children (five or older), disabled children, BME children and sibling groups. Research suggests that searching for an adoptive family for these groups of children requires professionals to consider a wider pool of approved adopters, which means looking outside of their own LA at the earliest opportunity (Farmer et al 2010). In this chapter we examine the perceptions of professionals and adopters about family finding for harder to place groups of children and unpick some of the issues encountered in making inter-agency placements. We begin by exploring the concept of ‘harder to place’.

2.1 What makes it harder to find a family for a child?

Focus groups were conducted with practitioners and adopters in order to explore their views and experiences of which children are harder to place. In addition, interviews with family finders explored individual children’s pathways, including how children’s characteristics can affect their adoption prospects.

Findings from the focus groups with practitioners indicated broad agreement that it tended to be harder to find a family for children of school age, those with a BME background (depending on local demographics), those with disabilities, and those who needed to be placed with their brothers or sisters. Older children were seen as harder to find families for not just because of their age per se, but because of the greater adversity they had experienced, and the impact of this on their development. However, many practitioners also said they had found it hard to find families for younger children who did not fit any of the existing categories. This was largely because of uncertainty about the impact of adverse experiences (particularly prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, and severe maltreatment) and family background (such as a family history of mental illness or learning disability) on the child’s future development. Interviews with family finders, which focused on the family finding journey for specific cases, also illustrated how such factors could be a cause of delay. Additionally, professionals pointed out that a child’s experience of sexual abuse was something that many adopters felt they could not consider.

Focus groups with adopters revealed many overlaps with the perspectives of professionals, but some differences. As emphasised by professionals, developmental uncertainty and ongoing developmental problems were seen as influencing a child’s chances of placement. Linked to this a strong theme from adopters’ focus groups was wanting to adopt a child who had the potential to be independent as an adult.

Adopters however showed an understanding that broad categories such as age or disability only allow partial understanding of what it might be like to parent the child. As one adopter argued, these ‘harder to place’ labels can be unhelpful as they may be off-putting for adopters yet have “nothing to do with [a child’s] personality”. In thinking about children’s needs, several adoptive parents talked about the “spectrum” or “range” of children’s needs within any particular category (such as emotional or behavioural problems, attachment difficulties and even autism). There was a strong focus on the severity of need (rather than the type of need *per se*). For adopters one of the main themes concerned children who showed particularly aggressive behaviour as this was seen as harder to manage both within the family and in the social context.

There were some differences between professionals and adopters in their views about sibling groups. Many adopters expressed an interest in adopting siblings. Professionals recognised this but were concerned that such aspirations could be too ambitious since many adopters over-estimate their capacity to cope with children’s complex needs.

Professionals participating in the study perceived that there had been an increase in the complexity of needs of children with a plan for adoption in recent years. The case level quantitative data supplied by LAs included information about children’s additional matching considerations (see table 1).

Table 1. Children's additional matching considerations

Type of consideration (n=499)	Present N (%)	Suspected N (%)
Disability (Phys/Sens)	17 (3.4%)	2 (0.4%)
Learning disabilities/difficulties	22 (4%)	0
Special Health Needs	57 (11%)	0
Behaviour problems	76 (15%)	0
Developmental delay	94 (19%)	2 (0.4%)
Attachment difficulties	121 (24%)	5 (1%)
Parental learning difficulties	98 (20%)	10 (2%)
Prenatal exposure to alcohol	171 (34%)	14 (3%)
Parental mental health issue	196 (40%)	7 (1%)
Prenatal exposure to drugs	203 (41%)	7 (1%)

* Analysis of the ALB data (Q2 2015-16) identified approximately 6% of children with a PO who were waiting for a placement at September 2015 as having a disability.⁵ The ALB definition of disability is however broader than our category of physical or sensory disability.

This revealed that across all children with POs the numbers of those with a physical or sensory disability or special health need were relatively low. However many more children were identified as having current difficulties related to behaviour (15%), developmental uncertainty (19%), or (attachment 24%). Factors related to potential future problems in development were even more prominent, particularly prenatal exposure to drugs (41%) and parental history of mental health problems (40%). Overall, for only 88 of 499 children (18%) no additional matching considerations were recorded, while about one third of children had 3 or more. Eleven children had 6 or 7 additional matching needs.

Overall these findings suggest that the current government definitions of children who may be 'hard to place' are broadly in line with the experiences of professionals and adopters, but for any one child the number, nature and severity of their individual characteristics and family history will be more important than broad categories in determining their chances of a match.

2.2 Assessment of children's needs

Another factor that was seen as impacting on the chances of children being matched with adopters was the thoroughness with which children's needs were assessed, and the extent to which this information was shared with all relevant parties. Social workers, managers, and adopters explained how problems with inadequate assessment could either delay the finalisation of potential matches through having to wait for more information to be provided, or result in substantial wasted time through pursuing matches that ended up being unsuitable. In some cases practitioners and even adoptive parents recounted cases where inadequate assessment or information sharing were seen as having led to the disruption of adoptions.

Some professionals and adopters felt that information sharing issues were further complicated in inter-agency placements (discussed further in section 2.4). VAA managers, who had experience of working with a variety of LAs, felt that often the issues with poor assessments or inadequate information could occur because of changes in

⁵ The quarterly ALB data is published at agency level. The Adoptions LA sheet shows 2,060 children with a PO but not yet placed at 30th September 2015 and of these 130 (6.3%) were disabled. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-leadership-board-quarterly-data-reports-2015-to-2016>

children's allocated social worker and the subsequent loss of personal knowledge about a child.

Some professionals expressed particular anxieties about the adequacy of assessment of the needs of siblings, individually and as a group, ahead of the PO being made. This was something that was a particular feature of some of the case studies, where indecision about whether to seek a placement for siblings together or separately had significantly delayed family finding. Some VAAs and LAs described the availability of specialist assessments of sibling groups (for example undertaken by psychologists). Overall however, there was a sense, particularly in some of the managers' narratives, of practitioners prioritising the need to place siblings together without having considered fully the pros and cons of this.

2.3 Aligning the expectations of prospective parents with the needs of children

Recent policy changes and practice developments have led to an increased number of people being approved as prospective adoptive parents. In 2014-2015, this resulted in a greater number of waiting adopters compared to waiting children (ALB, 2015b). Yet this wider pool of adoptive parents has not eliminated long waiting times for all children. In this section we explore reasons why this might be from the perspective of professionals and adopters. The key issue identified was that the initial hopes and expectations of adoptive parents were perceived to be often at odds with the needs of waiting children and work is required to help adoptive parents consider parenting a harder to place child.

In line with previous research (Ward 2011), the views of all of our participant groups suggested that the majority of people (although not all) who express an interest in building their family through adoption are hoping to parent an infant or young child with as few problems as possible. Thus, one of the key issues faced by adoption teams was helping enquirers to understand the implications of children's needs and exploring with them their own resources:

"...I think that there are less families that have the therapeutic insight that we need...I think the families that are coming forward are more often families that we need to train, and train quite hard, to become the kind of adopters that we need. I think there's few and far between that naturally get what we need them to get." (LA Manager)

From the family finder interviews, it was very clear that the parent qualities that were being sought for harder to place children were resilience and an ability to parent therapeutically; these sentiments were also expressed in the professionals' focus groups:

“It’s making sure the adopters ... have their own emotional intelligence .. so they can leave their own feelings behind and ... properly and therapeutically parent their children.” (VAA social worker)

Both professionals’ and adopters’ discussions identified that adopters vary considerably in their readiness to parent children with complex needs. Both groups said there was a need to explore these issues with prospective adopters from the point of first enquiry, in order to encourage adopters to consider a wider range of children (i.e. to “stretch” their preferences). Several adopters were able to describe this process of adjusting their initial hopes in the light of new information presented by social workers. For example one adopter said:

“...my mind changed to that it was more about I want to help a child rather than pretend there was nothing ever before that, and learning to appreciate the child’s past. So that totally changed.” (Adopter)

Professionals and adopters described this process of stretching preferences as a delicate balance in which encouragement to consider children with more complex needs needed to be balanced with realism about what the adopters were likely to be able to cope with (Bunt, 2014; Dance and Farmer, 2014). Both groups of participants also emphasised that the speed with which adopters become ready to parent a child with additional needs varies enormously, and continues beyond the point of approval. Factors identified by adopters as helping them achieve this delicate balance were receiving education and training, learning about the characteristics of waiting children, gaining hands-on experience with children, and meeting experienced adoptive parents.

2.4 Perceptions of problems with inter-agency placements

Across the interviews and focus groups professionals expressed both positive feelings and negative views of inter-agency placements and it was clear that all accepted the need for inter-agency working as a central feature of contemporary adoption practice. Advantages of inter-agency collaboration such as the sharing of resources and good practices were identified by local authority workers, particularly those in smaller authorities who were more dependent on partnerships with other agencies:

“... we are a small authority ... our resources aren’t huge. So if you do go to a larger area ... you will find ... different ideas or different training opportunities to offer the adopters or the children. ...That’s a positive we can tap into ...” (LA social worker).

During case study interviews with family finders, there were several examples of social workers speaking very positively about inter-agency matches for children. It would be fair to say however that throughout the data there was a clear preference on the part of most

LA participants to place children in-house where this was possible. Local authority social workers perceived a number of challenges created by inter-agency working.

Firstly, linking back to the importance of assessment of children's needs, some participants argued that in the context of an 'in-house' match, it was easy for an individual family finder to acquire very detailed knowledge of both the child's history and the prospective adopters' situation. Similarly following up on queries or obtaining further information was relatively straightforward if the worker for the family was in the same team, or the same building. Secondly, social workers expressed some concerns that inter-agency collaboration led to less reliable sharing of "really honest and in-depth information." Sometimes it was felt that this might be because of concerns about confidentiality but there was a sense of lack of trust in some agencies. As one interviewee stated:

"...I've got through to the stage of meeting with foster carers... then a whole lot of new information comes out that we just haven't known before ... it's just very frustrating." (LA adoption social worker)

This was further compounded by different worker remits within different agencies. As one LA social worker said:

"I think when you're working out of the authority... some of the roles are slightly different and then it gets clunky and then the working together doesn't happen." (LA adoption social worker)

The third challenge professionals associated with inter-agency placements related to practicalities of managing the placement process and support for the child and the adoptive family across geographical distances. For example, this could create difficulties in managing introductions, monitoring and supporting placements (support is discussed further below), and maintaining birth family contact. Some also voiced concern about the impact that a drastic change in location could have on a child in terms of geographical and associated cultural changes.

2.5 Supporting inter-agency adoptive placements

The importance of support was a strong and consistent theme from the perspective of adopters, adoption social workers and agency managers. One of the major factors mentioned in terms of support was geographical distance between the placing authority and the adopters' home. The distances involved in some of the case-study placements were significant (150-200 miles away in some cases) meaning that visiting was likely to take an entire working day. There was a concern therefore that the travelling time sometimes led to minimal visiting from children's social workers', leaving the adopters' agency to provide the majority of support for the adopters *and* the child. Lack of

appropriate support from children's social workers was sometimes linked in the professionals' narratives with increased risks of placement difficulties and potentially disruption. For example, tensions were also noted when an inter-agency placement was in difficulty and a child's worker and the adopter's worker may interpret those difficulties in very different ways. Participants also identified tensions in having to rely on other agencies to complete outstanding tasks, for example delays in completing life story work.

It was clear from focus groups and interviews with managers and family finders that existing relationships with other agencies were very important when considering inter-agency placements. A key theme throughout the data was that prior experience of cross agency working with particular agencies had a direct impact on willingness to engage with those agencies again, particularly when related to support, or a lack of support.

This response was not uncommon and suggests that if inter-agency placements are to serve children well, resources need to be in place for the placement to be fully supported.

VAs spoke in detail of support needs, explaining that supporting placements needed a proactive approach: that an appropriate support package should be identified before a match and regularly reviewed after placement. Further, they argued that support should be seen by adopters as an entitlement. Discussions in adopters' focus groups endorsed this: indeed several people who had decided to adopt through a voluntary agency had done so specifically because they felt the agency would offer them more support through and after the adoption process. Previous research (Farmer et al, 2010) found the writing of adoption support plans to be 'woolly' at best. However, in this study, most of the managers (LA and VAA) felt adoption support plans had improved, although some recognised they needed further improvement.

In thinking about therapeutic support, although the Adoption Support Fund (ASF)⁶ was seen by both adopters and professionals as a very helpful innovation, some continuing difficulties in accessing support were noted particularly in the inter-agency context. The first problem related to the availability of services and it was clear that some areas of the country were better served than others. Also, high demand meant that some services had very long waiting lists. Another area of concern was that it is the responsibility of the placing authority to make an ASF claim and some practitioners found this is not always prioritised and there were examples of families waiting almost 12 months to access therapeutic services.

⁶ The Adoption Support Fund is a sum set aside by central government to cover therapeutic support costs for adoptive placements. The application process to access this fund is managed by the placing LA. See: <http://www.adoption-support-fund.co.uk/>

Financial support was another area of consternation which tended to be voiced by VAAs (and adopters). In particular, VAA managers talked about adoption allowances and the criteria by which decisions were made about whether an allowance should be payable. It was clear during one VAA adopter focus group that concerns about both financial and therapeutic support persisted after placement.

Practitioners highlighted that inter-agency arrangements were not just harder to support *at a distance*, but also that their support needs (and the risks of the placement) were *higher* than for children placed in house. Whether inter-agency placements are actually at greater risk than those made in-house is an important question for future research to address. However, without doubt it is the children with higher levels of need for whom inter-agency matches tend to be arranged and it is these children who are likely to need a greater level of post-placement support.

2.6 Summary

- Examination of the children's pre-care experience, family histories and current needs revealed the complex and overlapping nature of needs that must be met by adoptive families.
- Social workers felt the government's HTP criteria were accurate but not sufficiently wide-ranging. Developmental uncertainty, inheritance risks (particularly of mental illness and learning difficulties), and experiences of sexual abuse were also thought to make it harder to find a family. Both professionals and adopters felt that factors such as age, sibling status, and minority ethnicity may only make children harder to place where they overlap with other factors.
- Adopters indicated that the children who were least likely to be considered for adoption were those whose health or development problems might restrict their ability to live independently as an adult. They felt it is the severity of children's health or developmental problems, rather than the category of problem, that is important.
- Professionals and adopters perceived a mis-match between the preferences of approved adopters and the characteristics of waiting children. Adopters for HTP children must be able to offer resilience, openness to uncertainty and a capacity for therapeutic parenting.
- Working with adopters to build realistic expectations is complex and the speed at which adopters become ready to parent children with additional needs varies enormously.

- Prospective adoptive parents' willingness to consider parenting a child with additional needs can be shaped by training, working with their social worker and experience with children.
- A preference for in-house placements was expressed by many local authority participants because of difficulties around communication, coordination, information sharing, professional relationships and trust between agencies.
- Where previous experiences of working with a particular agency had been positive this tended to encourage future joint working with that agency - but the opposite was also true.

In reviewing the evidence from the study on supporting inter-agency placements the main findings were:

- that there were difficulties, particularly for children's workers, in properly supporting placements made at a distance
- there was a lack of consistency in the availability of support services nationwide and a lack of information about the extent and quality of support services in different areas.
- the ASF was viewed positively although difficulties in accessing this had been experienced and it was suggested that these difficulties arose because the application needed to be made by the placing agency.
- that adequate financial support for families was important.

Chapter 3. Timeliness for HTP children and the role of the inter-agency fee

To understand what was happening in terms of family finding for harder to place children during the subsidy period, the study used pseudonymised child level data from each participating LA to consider changes in timeliness for children. This data was complimented by in-depth interviews with managers which focused on the contexts in which family finding was practised within agencies, and the role of the inter-agency fee and the subsidy.

3.1 Timeliness for HTP children before and during the subsidy period

The analysis of child level data set out to explore three questions:

- whether there were indications of change in the speed with which matches were found for children with a PO as a result of the government's subsidy of the inter-agency fee;
- whether the use of inter-agency matches had increased; and
- whether inter-agency matches had been made with other LAs or VAAs.

In total, data were provided for 500 children with POs made between April 2014 and March 2016. The data collected included dates of birth and key dates⁷ in a child's journey to placement with an adoptive family along with a series of fields identifying the matching considerations for each child. The key dates were used to calculate the time (in months) that each child waited between the granting of a PO and a match with prospective adopters. This measure then became the principal dependent variable for statistical analysis. On this point, it must be borne in mind that the focus here was on the identification of a match, not a placement. This is important when comparing our findings with much of the nationally published data, which often uses placement or indeed the making of an adoption order as a means of classifying groups of children.

We also created a variable to indicate whether or not a child would be considered 'harder to place' (HTP) according to the eligibility criteria used for the subsidy. However, because of limitations in our data, our 'harder to place' variable approximated rather than

⁷ Key dates were disguised in order to aid anonymity by replacing the day of the month with 15 in all cases meaning that calculations for times to events are approximate rather than exact.

reproduced the one used to confirm eligibility for the subsidy.⁸ A total of 278 children (55% of the sample) were included in this HTP group.

Sample characteristics

As can be seen from table 2 which presents the characteristics of this sample, just over half the children were boys and 87% were White (mostly White British). Nearly 4 in 10 (39%) of the sample children were under 12 months old when a placement order was made and 11% of the sample children were of school age (5 years or over).

Over half (57%) of the children with placement orders were to be placed alone: for 36% the plan was that they be placed for adoption with one sibling and for a small proportion of the sample (6%) the plan was for them to be placed with two or more siblings.

Table 2. Sample demographics

Characteristic		N=	%
Sex <i>Missing=5</i>	Male	258	52
	Female	237	47
Ethnicity <i>Missing=5</i>	White (inc Irish, Roma & other)	429	87
	Black (inc African, Caribbean & other)	17	3
	Asian	3	1
	Mixed/Dual heritage	42	9
	Other	4	1
Age Group <i>Missing=0</i>	0-11.99 months (<1 year)	195	39
	12-35.99 months (1-2 years old)	151	30
	36-59.99 months (3-4 years old)	98	20
	60 months + (5 years or older)	56	11
Sibling groups <i>Missing=3</i>	1 child to be placed	286	57
	1 of 2 siblings to be placed together	180	36
	1 of 3+ siblings to be placed together	31	6

NB: for later analyses Ethnic Group was collapsed to White (all) and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicity (BME) because of small numbers.

In terms of the profile of children with POs across LAs, metropolitan boroughs had a higher proportion of children from a minority ethnic background than was true for other types of agency.⁹ They also had higher proportions of children in the younger age groups

⁸ Our 'Harder to Place' variable included physical or sensory disability (as advised by LAs (n=17/500)), children 5+ at match (or 5+ and not yet matched) (n=57), children to be placed with one or more siblings (n=211/500), children with Black or Black/mixed minority background (n=66/500). Using this formula 278 of 500 (55%) children were in the HTP group. Length of time since entry to care was not available for all cases and was therefore not included.

⁹ $\chi^2 = 114.7$, $df=2$, $p<.001$

(that is younger when POs were granted¹⁰). The proportions of sibling groups were similar across LA types. There were no statistically significant differences according to region of the country (north or south). The profiles of children with POs were also similar over the two years apart from an increase in terms of the proportion of sibling groups of 3 or more children.¹¹ This may be an anomaly but it is consistent with qualitative reports from managers and practitioners who stated that they perceived an increase in the number of sibling groups coming into care at older ages and who subsequently have a plan of adoption.

Proportions of children matched and timeliness

Of the 500 children in the sample, 464 (93%) had been matched at the time the data were shared (or last updated) with the research team. A total of 95% of the children with POs granted in 2014-15 had been matched at the last data collection point, as had 91% of those receiving POs in 2015-16.

Table 3 presents the numbers of HTP and non-HTP children in each year, the proportions matched at last update from the LAs, and the mean times taken to find a match (for those children who had been matched). As can be seen, while a match had been found for the majority of children in both years, this was true for a larger proportion of the non-HTP group (99% in Year 1 and 95% in Year 2) than was the case for the HTP group (91% and 88%).

¹⁰ $\chi^2 = 17.5$, $df=6$, $p<.01$

¹¹ $\chi^2 = 11.5$, $df=2$, $p<.005$

Table 3. Proportions of children matched and mean time to match for HTP and non-HTP groups¹²

	Harder to place	Non-harder to place
Number with a PO made in 2014-15	141	113
• Of those, the number who are matched at the point data were received *	128 (91%)	112 (99%)
• Timeliness for those matched (months)	6.98	4.41
Number with a PO made in 2015-16	137	109
• Of those, the number who are matched at the point data were received *	120 (88%)	104 (95%)
• Timeliness for those matched (months)	4.13	2.84

* Data were received (or last updated) between July and September 2016

For both groups the average time to identify a match (where a match had been found) was significantly shorter in the second year: reducing from nearly 7 months to just over 4 months for HTP children, and from 4.4 months to just under 3 months for non-HTP children.¹³ Figures produced nationally showed a similar pattern of reduction in the mean times taken to identify matches for both HTP and non-HTP children, although the national figures show smaller proportions of children matched and shorter average times to match than was true for our sample (ALB, 2017a and 2017b). It seems likely that our ability to link directly with agencies to establish whether matches had been identified accounts for at least some of this difference in so far as our figures may include matches which had not been captured in the ALB data collection timeframe.

At the point data were shared 12 months had not elapsed since the making of the PO for all of the year 2 cohort. Analysis therefore considered the proportions of children matched in fewer than 6 months. This revealed that of children in the non-HTP group, 70% of the year 1 cohort had been matched in fewer than 6 months as had 84% of the year 2 cohort. For children in the HTP group these proportions were 52% and 70% respectively. Thus, significantly more children in both HTP and non-HTP groups had been matched within 6 months in the year 2 cohort than had been true in year 1¹⁴ (See figure 1).

¹² The national data produced for the ALB examines timeliness on a quarterly basis. When we restricted our analysis to matches identified by 30th June 2016 we found the proportions matched were slightly smaller. Of the HTP children 89% in the year 1 cohort had been matched by this time point as had 77% of the year 2 group. For non-HTP children the proportions matched were 99% from year 1 and 88% from year 2.

¹³ $F=27.2$, $df=1,246$, $p<.001$ and $F=16.5$, $df=1,214$, $p<.001$ respectively

¹⁴ $\chi^2 =5.7$, $df=1$, $p<.05$ for the non-HTP group and $\chi^2 =9.76$, $df=1$, $p<.005$ for the HTP group

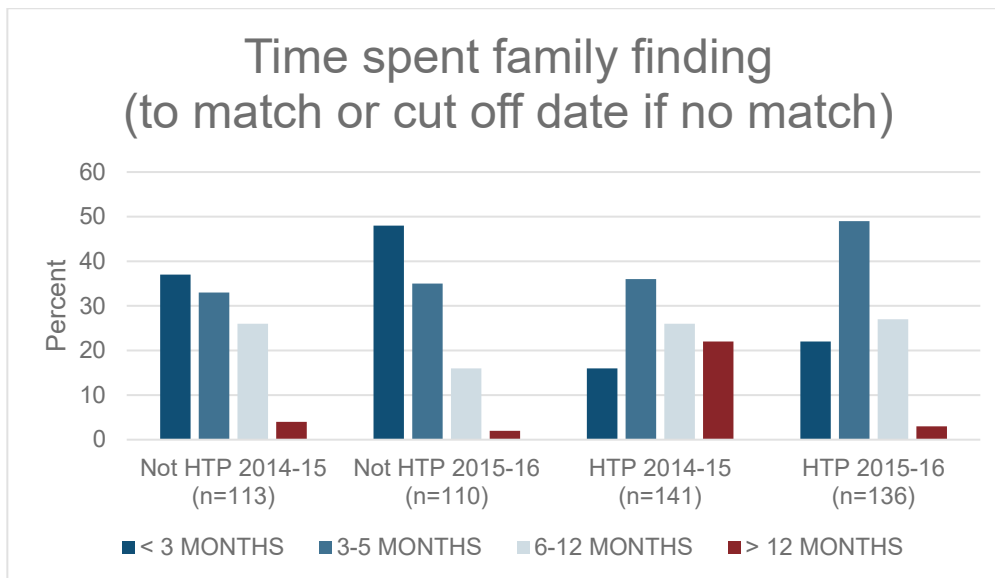


Figure 1. Time spent family finding in years 1 and 2 according to 'harder to place' group membership

In determining that matches were identified more swiftly for the later cohort of children in the sample, it is important to recognise that a number of factors may be operating. First, not all of the children had been matched and therefore, averages may well increase as matches are found. Second, it is very clear that, nationally, within this time frame there have been fewer children with POs and we have had a period where there has been a surplus of adopters leading agencies to reduce their recruitment and assessment activities. Thus it is possible that where there were fewer children for whom to family find, and fewer adopter assessments to conduct, more worker time might have been available to pursue the family finding task. This is consistent with the testimony of some of the managers who talked of periods during which there had been very few, or even no children waiting for a match. Furthermore, Link Maker became operational in April 2014 and recently seems to have truly national reach; this opened up the possibility for adopters to initiate enquiries about children and for family finders to search the database nationally for families.

Internal and external matches

The second question addressed by this part of the study focused on whether there was an increase in external (or inter-agency) matches. Our data show that 50% of 239 children in cohort year 1 and 47% of 220 children from cohort year 2 had been matched externally (49% overall). Examination of the national data for children placed for adoption (DfE, 2016; sheet A5) suggests that nationally 33% of children were placed with an external family. The fact that the study design allowed for cases to be followed for a longer period might account for some of the discrepancy between the two figures but it does appear that some of our participating agencies were quite high users of external placements across both years. In both cohort years external matches took longer to find

than internal matches, but both types of match were found more swiftly for children in cohort year 2.¹⁵

In thinking about which children were placed externally, the dominant factor was age.¹⁶ The other demographic characteristics we have considered so far showed no statistically significant associations in terms of whether children were placed internally or externally but it should be remembered that the numbers of larger sibling groups and children with a BME background were quite small, which reduces the ability of statistical tests to detect differences.

Types of external matches

The final question these analyses addressed concerned the type of agency with which external matches were made. In England, both local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies recruit and approve adoptive families, and VAAs have long focused on recruiting and preparing families able to consider children with more complex needs. Further analysis of the data from the Children Looked After in England statistics shows that of the children who had been placed for adoption with an external agency 57% of matches had been made with other LAs and 43% with VAAs in 2015-16 (DfE, 2016; sheet A5). Only 4 of the 7 participating LAs provided sufficient detail on placement providers to permit an assessment of the frequency with which each type of agency was used for external placements. Of the 4 LAs, 3 had used a mixture of 'other LA' and 'VAA' providers across both years while one had used only other LAs. Overall, there was an increase in the proportion of matches made with VAAs from 26% to just 30% between the 2 cohort years. Thus, there appeared to be less use of VAA providers among these 4 LAs than seems to be the case nationally.

3.2 Changes in LA adoption and family finding practice prior to the subsidy

There was a major theme across the professionals' narratives about changes in adoption practice and their impact on timeliness for children – prior to the introduction of the subsidy. From the interviews with managers, in particular it was clear that LAs had been focussing for some time on prioritising timeliness for children with a plan for adoption.

¹⁵ Cohort year 1, mean time to match 3.9 months for internal matches, 7.3 for external (F=37.1, df=1,233, p<.001). Cohort year 2, mean time to match 2.6 for internal and 3.9 for external (F=17.4, df=1,204, p<.001). The mean time to find external matches reduced from 7.3 (yr 1) to 3.9 months (yr 2) (F=35.1, df=1,210 p<.001). The mean time to find internal matches reduced from 3.9 (yr 1) to 2.6 months (yr 2); (F=12.8, df=1,227, p<.001).

¹⁶ Children in the older age groups were significantly more likely to be placed externally than younger children in both years ($\chi^2 = 23.9$, and $\chi^2 = 41.4$ (for years 1 and 2 respectively) df=3, p<.001).

Managers described changes in team structures, the introduction of new processes and procedures and the development of new roles. For example, one manager described why the LA had changed the point at which children's cases moved from the child protection or family support teams in an attempt to address drift at early stages:

“Previously, I think capacity within the front line services, so the family support teams and intensive family support teams, meant that their focus was largely on court and not perhaps thinking about the child's journey through to permanence. So, they were, in my view, making single-minded plans for children without thinking about involving other areas of the permanency service in that child's plan.” (LA Manager)

Several managers talked about processes which had been put into place in order to strengthen permanence planning and the ways in which those plans were monitored to avoid unnecessary delay. In relation to this, all of the managers talked about having tracking systems in place which allowed them to identify exactly where every child was on the adoption journey.

Another feature which was emphasised concerned ensuring there were effective links between the adoption team and the teams working with children's cases through care proceedings. Many of the LAs, although not all, had separated out roles within their adoption team and had dedicated family finding teams. Regardless of whether staff focused exclusively on family finding, children in all LAs would have an allocated family finder by the time the Agency Decision Maker had agreed that the child should be placed for adoption. The family finders we interviewed in relation to the case studies also emphasised the importance of knowing the child's case first hand early on, as this meant they usually knew whether there were potential families in house, or in the consortium or other partner agencies, before the PO was made. Managers talked very positively about these developments and concerns were raised about the importance of retaining strong links between the adoption team and children's teams as arrangements were made to move towards regional adoption agencies. As an aside, those LAs which co-located the adoption service and the children's teams felt this was very beneficial in promoting close joint working.

When LA managers were asked what they were particularly proud of in their service, all mentioned timeliness and all talked implicitly or explicitly about cultural shifts: As one interviewee stated this was about the focus on timeliness 'removing a culture of, "it's all right, we'll do it when we've got time" or you know, it's not really that much of a rush.... Not just here, I mean everywhere'. In all cases the discussions indicated that the changes needed to respond to the timeliness agenda had to be wider than just the adoption team:

“I think personally over the last three and a half years, we've made a massive shift in the way we practice, which has brought our score cards down and in terms of shifting culture as well. A shift in culture in the adoption service, in the safeguarding service, in legal

although there's still a bit of a battle ... a shift in culture, a shift in practice, the practice has always been good but because of all this need to tackle delay, we've changed our practice. So I'm really proud that, that's all been done and is working generally effectively." (LA Manager)

Rather than a sudden change of gear, what seemed to be described was a gradual evolution that was focused on timeliness: adoption scorecards, the regular ALB data collection, and OFSTED inspections were all mentioned by managers when describing their LA's approach to adoption work. Importantly, for all LAs the focus on improving systems and processes had begun prior to the introduction of the subsidy, although agencies were at different stages of embedding these at the time of the study. Two of our participating LAs had also established a partnership arrangement with a VAA to enhance the range of families that could be swiftly considered.

The majority of LAs said the subsidy had not made much difference to their approach to family finding, although it was clear that in some cases the availability of the subsidy had removed the need to seek approval before exploring external links, meaning they could start to search more quickly.

In all the LAs, the approach to family finding was 'sequential', and they tended to follow a similar pattern. For example, in-house adopters were considered first, followed by the consortium or partner VAAs, followed by referral to the Adoption Register, profiling on Link Maker and exploring other wider search routes, including sending out profiles to other agencies. However, the impression given by all professionals was that this all happened extremely quickly and, because of the adoption team's early involvement with children's cases, the first 2 steps at least were usually complete before a Placement Order was in place.

This links to the importance of established relationships within and between agencies as discussed in chapter 2 and the range of tensions and difficulties that some inter-agency placements can pose.

All of the family finding resources currently available were mentioned by all groups of participants. Link Maker was felt to be an important resource for some children and in some of the case study interviews, links were identified through this medium. Professionals were generally very positive about the principle of adopter-initiated linking, although there were concerns about the volume and range of enquiries that some adopters made through Link Maker and both professionals and adopters talked about how stressful adopter led searching could be. Adoption exchange days and activity days were also felt to be helpful mechanisms for family finding for HTP children, particularly in reaching areas with a different demographic when family finding for children with a BME background for example.

Although previous consortium arrangements for LAs had been disrupted by the move to regionalisation, ongoing meetings and communication with neighbouring LAs and VAA

partners continued to be an important source of links and consortia registers and exchange days were also still active in some areas.

“Whilst at times we might not get immediate results in the shape of making a match, it’s all this stuff that social workers talk about, about networking and putting your profile out to people and identifying what’s going on in the world and it does help.” (VAA manager)

This same manager went on to emphasise that a mixed economy of family finding resources was needed. The importance of the networking mentioned above was very noticeable in the narratives of some of the family finders we interviewed, several of whom mentioned that it was in conversation with others, in team meetings, in consortium meetings or at other events, that links had first been identified. Indeed some of the links that were discussed seemed to have come about by pure happenstance.

3.3 Quality of matches

For all children, but particularly those with greater levels of need, it is important to be thorough in considering whether a match is right for a child. One of the innovative practices we came across was the use of a ‘matching matrix’ with adopters at the initial linking stage. Only one manager mentioned this but since we did not specifically ask about how agencies managed the detail of matching we cannot be sure how widespread it might be. Mapping out a child’s apparent needs and challenging families to discuss how they might meet those needs does feel like a helpful process, although this does require that the child’s needs have been properly assessed.

Managers were asked during interviews whether they perceived any impact on the quality of matches in the period the subsidy was available. The over-riding sense from the data, from both managers and practitioners, was that the quality of matches had not suffered as a result of the subsidy, or as a result of speedier matching.

3.4 The impact of the subsidy

There was a mixed response from participants about the subsidy. In some agencies social workers did not experience the inter-agency fee as a barrier to placing children out of agency (interestingly practitioners in a number of agencies were not even aware of the subsidy being available). As has been discussed, some of our participating agencies were high users of inter-agency placements prior to the introduction of the subsidy and in these agencies concerns about fees did not seem to be an issue. In other cases family finders reported the subsidy making a good deal of difference in so far as they were ‘freed up’ to engage immediately in external searching without needing to seek approval, meaning that matches were identified more swiftly. The difference in views is striking, and strongly suggests that there continues to be variation across agencies in terms of how readily inter-agency placements are considered.

Some of the adopters did perceive a reluctance on the part of their LA to explore inter-agency matches, though only one person thought this was to do with money. Another made the point that while their LA did look elsewhere, they “did try to limit themselves to within the consortium... And weren’t terribly proactive in looking outside”. This of course reflects back to the issues of distance and knowledge of other agency’s practice discussed previously (see Chapter 2).

Voluntary agency workers’ views were varied and some clearly thought that finances would always be a factor. Examples were given of cases where fees certainly played a part such as a recent case where social workers were trying to find an in-house match for a young child for whom the fee could not be reclaimed. In a similar vein, one of the VAA managers mentioned a case where a LA social worker had met and been impressed with a family but her manager subsequently contacted the VAA to say that they couldn’t proceed because the subsidy had ended (even though it was continuing at that point).

Although the majority of the LA managers in our sample felt their practice had not significantly changed because of the subsidy, all recognised that the ability to reclaim the inter-agency fees for some children had been beneficial for their service, and in some cases had enabled them to expand or develop services in other areas of adoption and children’s services.

VAA managers were supportive of the subsidy in principle, although they had not perceived the increase in links that they might have hoped would result. Overall, while there were examples of partnership arrangements between LAs and VAAs, these tended to have been in place prior to the introduction of the subsidy and some VAA managers felt that the availability of the subsidy was unlikely to encourage a significant change in this because of its temporary nature.

3.5 Participants’ thoughts about the inter-agency fee

Throughout the managers’ interviews some questions were raised about the inter-agency fee and how this might work more effectively. There was an interesting split of opinion, with one manager commenting on how £27,000 is “massive”. Others felt this was a small sum in comparison to the costs if children were to remain in foster care, and they used, or intended to use, this rationale when arguing for their inter-agency budget. Interestingly, no one referred to the fact that it costs LAs a similar sum to recruit and approve their own adopters in order to place in-house (Selwyn et al, 2009).

That said, there were concerns from both LA and VAA perspectives about the amount of administrative time that was needed to manage the inter-agency fee. The fact that the subsidy was payable in one lump sum was felt to be very helpful, in contrast to the fee usually being paid in two instalments – with one upfront payment when the match is made, and on Adoption Order / after 12 months. Finally, some managers raised questions about the steep rise in costs for sibling group placements since the cost of

recruitment and assessment is not increased. One VAA manager felt the basic sum of £27,000 fell well short of covering the costs associated with a placement when supporting such a placement was taken into account.

The VAA perspective on how fees should be managed tended to focus on central funding for inter-agency placements:

“[The subsidy] was certainly a move in the right direction and I would like to see it go further, to have it removed from the responsibility of the local authority entirely, so that children get the placements they need without anybody saying ‘Well, it’s going to cost us...’”

This sentiment was echoed by another who felt: *“the financial aspect, however much it shouldn’t ..., does get in the way, it’s always there and local authorities are so tight and strapped for cash.”*

One other idea from a VAA manager was to do away with fees altogether and centrally fund VAAs to recruit and assess adopters. There were also comments about whether a model of commissioning might be better than a fee structure, or that there should be different levels or staged payment of fees.

Overall, the comments from managers about the inter-agency fee and how it might be better managed suggest that the time is right to reconsider the sums involved, what it is supposed to cover and who should pay and when. This is perhaps particularly important in light of the move towards Regional Adoption Agencies, in the context of which all participants anticipated that there would continue to be a need for external placements. At the time of data collection for this study the way in which fees would be managed within the new structures was unclear to all managers and was perceived as something which needed to be addressed. Several expressed the view that they had expected some government guidance on this issue. Unsurprisingly perhaps, adoptive parents expressed the view that financial concerns should not get in the way of inter-agency matches being made: “It is the children who are important not the money.”

3.6 Summary

This chapter began by exploring the profiles of children with placement orders made during 2014-15 and 2015-16 and examined the rate at which matches were found for those children. It then moved on to consider the ways in which practice had evolved within LAs and the impact of the fee and the subsidy. The key findings are:

- Within this sample more matches were made for both HTP children and non-HTP children within 6 months of PO during the subsidy period than was true in the preceding year. Both internal and external matches were identified more swiftly.

- As a group, participating agencies made external matches more often than national data suggests (49% v 33%) and these were more often made with other LAs rather than VAAs.
- Overall, the analyses of the quantitative data suggest that there has been a change in behaviour, resulting in shorter times being taken to find a match. However, these analyses cannot show that this change is a direct result of the subsidy.
- All LAs had introduced changes in process and practice to prioritise, monitor and facilitate timeliness where adoption was, or might become, the plan for a child. Importantly, the changes pre-dated the introduction of the subsidy.
- Seen as critical to timeliness was the close involvement of dedicated family finders at an early stage and concerns were expressed about the need to ensure strong links between adoption teams and children's teams were maintained in the move to regionalisation.
- The family finding process within LAs continues to be sequential, but was reported to happen swiftly, with a range of resources used when looking externally. While evidence from many LA participants suggested that inter-agency matches were considered routinely, VAA managers and practitioners perceived ongoing issues with sequential decision-making and some reluctance on the part of LAs to consider external placements.
- Matches are always a risk but participants did not perceive that the availability of the subsidy had led to poorer matches.
- In relation to whether the inter-agency fee is seen as a barrier to inter-agency placements evidence was mixed: some perceived no difference in their agency's practice during the life of the subsidy while others saw significant benefits.
- The issue of fees was significant, particularly in relation to VAAs and especially in the context of RAAs. Some participants reported that there had been an expectation that there would be central guidance on this. A variety of suggestions were made about how the inter-agency fee might be restructured.

Chapter 4: Conclusions and recommendations

This report has outlined the main findings of a study which was commissioned to explore the impact of the government's subsidy of the inter-agency adoption fee for some groups of children, and to consider this within the broader context of contemporary adoption practice and experience.

Participants identified a variety of drivers for changes in adoption practice that predated the subsidy. Thus, while matches were seen to have been found more swiftly during the year the subsidy was in place, this cannot be attributed to its availability. Overall, the picture that has emerged from this study is one of the very complex issues that surround family finding and, within this complex picture, the issue of financing of inter-agency placements is just one component. In some cases, and in some agencies more than others, a reluctance to pay an inter-agency fee may have delayed matches. Conversely, the subsidy of the fee, for some children and in some agencies may have removed a barrier and enabled an adoptive placement. Overall, those with direct experience have emphasised the huge range of factors that impact on family finding beyond LA boundaries, with many of these being seen as more significant than the inter-agency fee or its subsidy.

The findings indicate that factors that can help in the process of timely matching for harder to place children include:

- Effective work with adoptive parents to help them understand the needs of waiting children, and understand (and develop) their own capacity to meet these needs.
- Good inter-agency working relationships between agencies, including responsive and open/honest communication, clarity regarding information sharing and an understanding of the way roles and responsibilities are allocated.
- Good experiences of inter-agency placements in previous cases.
- Positive attitude by local authority to the payment of inter-agency fees where these are needed (recognising that it costs the same to approve in-house adopters) and efficient mechanisms for approving a wider search.
- Good assessments of children's needs to aid matching and avoid the need for plans to be revised/revisited at a later stage.
- Effective mechanisms for the adoption team's involvement in early permanence planning and the tracking of cases through proceedings and beyond.
- A dedicated family finding social worker who has a good knowledge of the child and his or her needs.
- Family finders who are able to develop networks and exploit the range of family finding resources.

- Confidence about the support services available to the child and the adoptive family in inter- agency placements, especially the capacity of the child's social worker to provide support as needed.
- Not too great a distance between the placing local authority in the placement provider / or a commitment to overcoming barriers caused by geographical distance.

Key recommendations for policy and practice

In terms of policy and the national overview the key recommendations are:

- It is important that timeliness continues to be monitored centrally, and at the LA level, in the post-subsidy period.
- Consideration should be given to ways of decreasing geographic variation in adoption support services, adoption allowances and financial support.
- Consideration should be given to exploring the ways in which LAs make decisions about inter-agency placements, both in terms of budgetary planning and in individual cases.

For children's services departments and adoption teams:

- Preparation and training can help adopters to consider harder to place children, but this needs to include therapeutic parenting training
- There needs to be flexibility in the 'advice' given in panel recommendations for adopters to allow for adopters extending their horizons post approval
- LAs (and Regional adoption agencies in due course) should ensure that there are mechanisms to support strong links between adoption teams and children's social work teams in the early stages of planning for children at both practitioner and managerial levels. This will provide early alerts to adoption teams when external family finding may be needed.
- Where children have additional matching needs, consideration should be given to seeking the relevant permissions to begin family finding before a placement order is made.
- Family finding work needs to be undertaken by someone with a good knowledge of both the child and of family finding resources. Ideally a dedicated role.
- The implementation of formal mechanisms to monitor and promote timeliness should become routine practice within LAs.

- Workforce development is needed in order to ensure that thorough assessments of children's needs have been conducted and that planning is clear before family finding starts.
- In order to encourage appropriate adopter-initiated enquiries (and ensure that family finders are able to make informed decisions in a timely way) agencies need to find ways to ensure that information about both children's needs and adopters' capacities is provided in a way that is both accurate and easily accessible.
- Attention needs to be given to how trust can be built between agencies when children are to be placed out of area. This needs to include improving the quality and completeness of information sharing, effective coordination between agencies (including addressing issues of previous poor experience) and appropriate commitments to support which are subsequently fulfilled.
 - The planning for effective social work support for children placed far from their local authority is a vital consideration within this.
- With the move to regionalisation of adoption agencies it is timely for the organisations involved in fee setting to consider how inter-agency fee structures should operate in the future.

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