



Department
for Education

Evaluation of regional adoption agencies: leadership

Research brief

March 2022

**Natasha Burnley, Rachel Blades and
James Ronicle, Ecorys UK and Professor
Julie Selwyn, The Rees Centre,
Department of Education, University of
Oxford**



Government
Social Research

Contents

Introduction	3
1.The attributes of effective RAA leadership	4
2.Collaboration between RAA leaders	9
3.Collaborative working with other local services	13

Introduction

This research brief is informed by Ecorys' and the Rees Centre's research conducted between 2018 and 2021 as part of the evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). The evaluation involved in-depth, longitudinal case studies with seven RAAs plus interviews with other RAAs, RAA projects and national stakeholders, as well as research with adoptive parents. This brief draws on evidence from the qualitative research with Heads of Service (HoS), strategic stakeholders, operational managers and frontline staff working in and with RAAs.¹

This brief covers three key areas:

1. The attributes of effective RAA leadership
2. Collaboration between RAA leaders
3. Collaborative working with other local services

Some of the ideas reported as part of the evaluation may not be particularly innovative, but the research found the factors covered in this paper were important, with the leadership provided to teams and families enhanced with these elements in place.

¹ For further details, please see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

1. The attributes of effective RAA leadership

Strong leadership has been central to the implementation of the RAA programme, locally, regionally, and nationally. To support systems' change and new ways of working together, consistent, and collaborative leadership was needed throughout RAAs from team managers to HoS and strategic boards. The evaluation found that effective RAA leadership manifested itself in the following ways and with the following outcomes:

- **Building a shared RAA vision** across the region helped develop mutual understanding, respect, and joint working to better support the needs of waiting children, prospective adopters, and adoptive families.
- Having a HoS who could **create and maintain** the RAA vision over time and in the face of challenges has proved to be vital in ensuring the effective implementation of a consistent approach across the operation of the RAA. RAA leaders did this by:
 - Ensuring that both senior management and frontline staff (including those still working in the local authorities) were clear on the specific vision for the RAA and that everyone knew their roles in achieving this.
 - Holding regular team meetings to bring staff together to discuss experiences. This was important especially in 'hub and spoke' models, where teams were working across different localities; and across all RAAs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Recognising that the visual identity of RAAs plays an important role for building a team identity and promoting the visual identity of the RAA from the outset, including through RAA branding and website.
 - Having a regular HoS presence throughout the offices and working localities of the RAA staff team.
 - Developing and maintaining good working relationships with Directors and Assistant Directors of Children's Services in the local authorities that make up the RAA was very important.
- **Encouraging regular feedback from all staff** (including administrative staff, social workers, HR, finance, panel staff and local authority social workers) about their views on processes and practice. Importantly, **sharing the outcome of the feedback** with all staff. HoS that were able to secure buy-in to a shared RAA vision were also successful in instilling confidence in their team managers, involving them through consultation and collaboration during the transition process and beyond.
- **Continuing efforts to bring RAAs together** through delivering all-service events, quarterly team meetings, drop-in sessions, and informal group events. The

COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of a sense of togetherness, with leadership playing a key role in facilitating this connection across services.

- Instilling **clarity, connection, and feedback loops** at different layers of management enabled RAAs to develop **resilience** even when there was instability in one layer (for example, if the HoS left).

The research found common principles of effective leadership that have secured success for RAAs at different timepoints:

1. During the early development of the RAA, including through to ‘go live’:

- Creating a respectful culture, leading by example, being visible and available were all found to be key tenets of constructive RAA leadership characteristics.
- The ability to strive and drive forward the RAA vision for adoption services.
- Highly skilled negotiation, accountability-holding and brokering of relationships (with local authorities, external organisations, and practitioners).
- Bringing extant organisational knowledge of both the adoption service pre-RAA and the tacit understanding of the process to becoming an RAA.
- Identifying inconsistencies in practice across the RAA.
- Being attune to the needs of families through the changes RAAs present for them and their children.

2. Longer term within an established RAA:

- Liaising with the board and wider stakeholders for the best outcomes, as new challenges emerge.
- Continually developing RAA workers’ understanding of complex authority structures and functions as well as reiterating roles with local authorities, adoption panels, Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) and Adoption Support Agencies (ASAs).
- Generating a wider understanding of the national picture for adoption and how individual RAAs can effect change and be affected by England-wide developments.
- Identifying examples of innovative and good practice and driving forward practice improvements.

Where stable and consistent leadership was not present within the RAA, there were challenges:

- Some RAAs experienced temporary changes to leadership and felt that longer-term contracts with RAA leaders offered stability and security for the organisation

and teams. Interim HoS and senior management posts presented insecurity for the people in these roles, the RAA, the workers and potentially, for the wider system. Whilst such changes were unavoidable at times, demonstrating the attributes/common principles (above) for effective leadership supported wider staff teams through these ups and downs.

- At times, changes in leadership meant that RAA staff felt like they were in the development phase for too long (for example, over two years), which made it hard to maintain momentum and somewhat eroded staff members' enthusiasm for the transition to a RAA.
- Where key stakeholders had strong conflicting perspectives and no consistent leadership, it became more difficult to steer the RAA direction and develop a clear standardised approach to delivering adoption services.
- RAAs that were experiencing organisational change during the COVID-19 pandemic had additional difficulties whilst navigating the uncertainty of this period, which had brought court delays and necessitated amends to policy and procedures.
- There were **concerns that the organisational knowledge that RAA leaders** had gained through the RAA programme, from inception to implementation, **may be lost** as current HoS move on or retire. It could be challenging to replace a HoS with a suitably skilled candidate with the necessary operational and strategic experience in adoption services. A common theme was that this expertise needs to be secured and retained to ensure the continued development of a RAA.

Case Study – Managing the change process

The research highlighted the key role of leadership in the transition stages: for developing the vision, building ownership, and managing staff morale. Case study HoS had used their skills to **inspire and empower** the different layers of management so that they felt in control of the process. Speaking about their HoS in one RAA, a team manager reflected:

She lets managers manage...she enables people to be confident to manage, then leads and shapes as needs to. – Team manager

Spending time building up the confidence of team managers paid dividends later, in terms of frontline staff members' satisfaction with management. Frontline team members commented on their confidence in their manager to do the best for their team.

We feel in really safe hands with the manager we have got. For us having complete faith in [the manager] has been amazing. I know it's

been really hectic for everybody, but we feel very supported and very protected ... that they have got your back and are capable... [I have] a lot of respect for them professionally. – Social worker

Case Study – Facilitating communication and relationship building within the RAA

Providing opportunities for larger cohorts of the RAA staff to come together, discuss and input had been “really important for building identity, culture and buy-in” (HoS).

In one case study, this was done through staff training, all-service events and holding a conference on identity and culture of the RAA. Absorbing feedback through these larger meetings into year one of being live, the RAA commissioned both Dyadic Developmental Practice training for practitioners and Supervision training for managers.

To supplement this, the leadership team had developed a workforce development plan, and looked at each staff group to determine what they needed to progress.

We are trying to be really responsive to what people want. Increasingly looking at how they can do more about partnership working with the local authorities. So, we are offering training to local authority staff too. – Case study RAA HoS

Case Study – Promoting staff wellbeing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic

During 2020 when there was an ongoing uncertainty about the COVID-19 pandemic, initiatives were put in place to maintain connections and promote staff wellbeing. Importantly, staff wellbeing and connectivity were facilitated from the top down, particularly in RAAs that reported strong leadership. Staff and strategic stakeholders said leaders had maintained a sense of openness, approachability, and collaboration in moving through the pandemic, with staff wellbeing a key priority alongside the quality of the service for children and families.

[HoS] has been very committed to the welfare of staff and that's made a huge difference. - Case study strategic stakeholder

Case Study – Role of team managers during the COVID-19 pandemic

One case study RAA had small team supervision groups that always checked-in and kept in contact during those early times of lockdown. The staff team did not feel alone even though some of them were adjusting to the sudden shock of feeling “locked in the house.” The management team tried to ensure that those informal chats and kitchen coffees were being replicated despite home working. They set up virtual meetings for the wider teams as well as smaller group meetings.

I do think we've got good managers in the sense that from my experience it wasn't a negative one. It was very much the attitude of right, team, this has happened, 'this is what we can do, this is what we can't do'. I think we had quite proactive leads within our management. It was about how we could move forward and develop rather than whinge and moan, I think that helped. – Social Worker

Questions arising from the research:

- Are members of the leadership team leading by demonstrating the attributes/common principles that were observed in examples of effective leadership (above)?
- How are members of staff across the service brought together, both formally and informally to help with team working, share learning, gather feedback, and support the effective operation of the RAA?
- How is the feedback of staff members taken on board in the development of the service? How is this communicated to the team?
- Are there opportunities for staff to 'test out' new ideas and practice?
- Are middle managers supportive to the RAA, and do they feel empowered to lead their teams through the move from local authority to RAA-led adoption services and as an RAA team manager?
- Do HoS maintain a presence and/or visibility across different offices?
- Do the middle managers, HoS and RAA Board have a good overview of children who might need an adoptive placement and those who are currently waiting? Can they predict the numbers of adoptive parents needing to be recruited in the short and longer term?
- Are systems being developed to ensure adoptive parents, birth parents, adopted adults and young people's views can influence practice improvements?
- How is consistency in service delivery being monitored across the RAA?
- How are complaints managed?
- Has the RAA website been updated to reflect current good practice?
- How is the RAA actively cascading and sharing the learning from the process of regionalising adoption services?

2. Collaboration between RAA leaders

The transition from local authority-led adoption services to RAAs has provided some opportunities to build and strengthen collaborative working across adoption services:

- The **development of a national leadership group for adoption and the introduction of a National Adoption Strategic Lead**. RAA HoS are part of a leaders' group, which enables members to come together to share learning and experiences and offers much-valued peer support. RAA Leaders reported that they have found the group meetings and joint working extremely helpful in supporting individual leaders to develop their skills, confidence, resilience, and resources to maintain accountability.
- **To support the transition to RAAs, the RAA Leaders Programme was introduced to provide** coaching and personal development opportunities for HoS in recognition that the role required certain skills to establish and develop new organisations. Through this programme participants were coached to become system leaders (both regionally and nationally) to raise the profile of adoption and ultimately improve outcomes for children.

Since the start of the evaluation of RAAs, examples of collaborative working across RAAs have developed over time. Early in the development of RAAs, there were examples of RAAs coming together to work on shared interest topics and further links between individual RAAs, VAAs, ASAs, health services, education settings, and the family courts. More recently, these included the development of a multi-regional approach to tackling placement disruptions; an approach which broadly reflects the proposal set out in *Regionalising Adoption*² for the creation of regional permanence hubs.

It's about [X number of] RAAs and we'll meet now to look at what we can do across that whole footprint... I mean, one of the work streams are across the whole of [the region] is working with the VAAs across there. So, for us that's beneficial because we've only got one [VAA] in our area now, so we're looking at our sufficiency and whether we should have any sort of alliance with the VAAs and more formal arrangement, mainly with the aim of placing our children, more within the [area]. – HoS

²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

A main theme in the qualitative research were the benefits of taking a collective approach to tackling challenges:

- A **collective system leadership** is more adaptive, more consistent and faster to act cooperatively than prior to RAAs.
- A **greater level of accountability** due to shift from high numbers of local authority team managers to 31 RAA leaders, who have the strategic profile to bring in Assistant Directors and Directors of Children's Services as necessary. People report that RAA leaders have raised the profile of adoption with services and families, enhanced networking between RAAs, and developed a collective voice linked to the RAA Leaders' Group.
- The RAA leadership reported having more **influence on policy and practice** together than individual service managers had before. The DfE has allocated funding through HoS for other (previously segmented) tasks such as the combined funding to support a coordinated approach to the National Adoption Week campaign which gave RAAs a joint focus.
- The RAA leaders' group and related working groups have enabled RAA leaders to **share practice and knowledge** as well as gain peer support.

There were, however, challenges with taking a collective approach:

- **Striking a balance between the newly formed RAA leaders' group expertise and the wider adoption system:** The research found that other agencies, such as VAAs, felt that their expertise was being ignored despite playing a key role in adoption nationally.
- For RAAs going through **transitional change**, either through a change in leadership or recently going live, the HoS focus was on their RAA and collaborative working had to take a back seat.

What did leaders think of the leadership group?

It's a really good space to meet other people. Being only 30 of us doing this job in the country. So that's been really important to do that and to kind of think about how it's opened up the possibility to think about adoption work in a broader context. – Case study RAA HoS

Sharing of knowledge and experience across the RAAs has been great and so useful...it has been so important to have those formalised networks for the service leads. – Non-case study RAA HoS

The RAAs leaders' group is a really influential group, really got the ear of the DfE and the minister, which they wouldn't have had before. – Case study RAA HoS

Sharing of knowledge and experience across the RAAs has been great and so useful...it has been so important to have those formalised networks for the service leads. – Non-case study RAA HoS

For the first time [in adoption] you're seeing collective system leadership. – National stakeholder.

Having a really strong management team and the RAA leaders programme has been really important. These things have done a lot of work around creating conditions for ongoing success. – Case study RAA HoS

Case study – The national leadership group in the COVID-19 response

During the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, the RAA leaders' group enabled the RAA leadership to gain support from one another, as well as from the DfE.

Leaders came together to share learning that prompted agencies to “consciously continue to progress adoption plans and assessments of adopters throughout the pandemic.” (National stakeholder). The shared learning enabled RAAs to devise approaches and validate them with one another, raising the confidence of local authorities in that decision-making process.

They created four subgroups to focus on specific elements of practice, such as matching. The sub-groups were made up of different RAA and local authority adoption leaders, supported by DfE. The thematic sub-groups created documentation and a common risk matrix which was then shared amongst the RAAs.

I think the ability to bring people together and the fact that the structures are in place to do that is probably the single most impactful part of the RAA programme. – National Stakeholder

Questions arising from the research:

- What mechanisms are used to share good practice, both within and across RAAs?
- How often do RAAs and other agencies come together to take stock and reflect on practice?
- How useful are existing mechanisms for working in partnership?
- Are there any gaps?
- What, if any, opportunities exist for team managers to join up and develop their leadership skills and play a greater role in sharing good practice?
- Is there scope to support middle managers to shadow HoS to offer intermediary leadership when needed and/or improve progression opportunities within the RAA?
- Is there sufficient coaching of future leaders who may take the RAA forward in the future?

3. Collaborative working with other local services

As part of the evaluation, key stakeholders reported that it was important to build and maintain strong links with local authorities, VAAs and other local services such as health and education to inform children and family support plans. Working to build relationships early and continuously helped to facilitate a shared understanding, improve, and formalise collaboration between existing and new partners within and outside of the RAA.

The research found some key facilitators to partnership working between the leadership of the RAA and other local services:

- **Historic partnership working** remains a glue that holds the RAA together, especially for those who already worked in consortiums as they can build on existing joint working foundations. Where relationships existed prior to the transition to RAA, partners have more easily overcome any challenges associated with variations in previous performance and caseloads.
- **Maintaining links** with local authorities to ensure that the partnership works across RAAs and local authorities and reduces the potential sense of separation, for example by holding wider events or joint training.
- Creating **strategic links with external services**, such as schools. There were examples of RAAs providing training directly to schools and working closely with schools to meet the needs of individual children. One RAA had begun working on a trauma informed education project linked with VAAs and virtual schools, which they believed to be an example of good practice that would help to improve school readiness.
- Recognising the **skills, experience, and expertise that VAAs** can bring to the RAA. The research found examples of framework agreements between the VAA and the local RAA to find families for harder to place children and of a VAA Partnership Working Group, involving local VAA partners to work through opportunities as well as sufficiency.
- **Prioritising time for building more informal links**, for example through closer working between RAAs, education, and NHS staff to help raise awareness and professionals' understanding of the resources and support needs of adopted children and to make these more of a priority. This could be done by bringing in specialist staff, formalised meetings/workshops and making space to devote time to developing more informal links.

There were, however, challenges:

- Without strong links at senior strategic level, it was **more difficult to improve connections** between RAAs and the wider system even where previously links were well-established. This was especially so when there were changes such as local authority restructuring that were outside of the RAA's immediate control.
- There were sometimes **tensions between national and local government priorities**. RAAs will need to continue to work more closely with local leaders (including Directors and Assistant Directors of Children's Services, Lead Members for Children and Young People and other local services) to manage changes in the adoption numbers (and all routes to permanency).
- The **level of variation in collaborative working between the RAAs** with other agencies – namely with VAAs and the judiciary.
- Although some VAAs delivered services through the RAA and one was a strategic partner, others were just involved as RAA board members. In the latter arrangement, **VAA** stakeholders had voiced their **concern** about how it was limiting their involvement in the new adoption landscape.
- There was consensus around **the need to build better links** between RAAs, local authorities and VAAs **around Early Permanence**, further improve training for staff and adopters and better manage 'risk' in planning.
- Continued and improved partnership working will help to **overcome challenges external** to RAAs (e.g., local government restructuring, funding pressures) which presented risks to the impact and effectiveness of RAAs.

Case study – Supporting relationships with the local authority

Relationships between the RAA and one local authority in the partnership became strained, as the RAA was a perceived risk to performance. The RAA overcame this risk by “reporting back, in all sorts of ways, formally and informally” (HoS). Sitting underneath the management board, the RAA HoS and service manager linked in with a group of service managers from the local authorities to keep those links connected.

To bolster the strategic level communications, RAA team managers and practitioners met with local authority staff on a regular basis to work cases and be visible in shared offices.

Supplementing this, the RAA held informal reviews with the local authorities throughout the working year and provided formal reports every six months.

Questions arising from the research:

- Do HoS and strategic leads working with the RAA (including VAA partners), agree on the vision and know how to communicate it within the RAA?
- Has there been an opportunity to assess different local authority and/or VAA partners' practices and explore how best practice from each partner can make one RAA approach?
- How closely are RAAs working with VAAs, Virtual School Heads, health, and other partners, if and how could the approach be improved?
- How are RAAs continuing to work with family courts through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, if and how could you strengthen these links?
- How can RAAs make the most of existing formal links and networks and what, if anything, needs to be done to make them more effective?
- Can RAAs do any more to prioritise and extend informal links?



Department
for Education

© Department for Education 2022

Reference: RR1190

ISBN: 978-1-83870-328-8

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:

maura.lantrua@education.gov.uk or www.education.gov.uk/contactus

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications