

RESEARCH BRIEFING

INTER-AGENCY ADOPTION AND THE GOVERNMENT'S SUBSIDY OF THE INTERAGENCY ADOPTION FEE



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Why is this study important?

Where looked after children are to be adopted, earlier placement with an adoptive family is associated with better long-term outcomes for children, and 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. Suitable adopters may be available through other LAs or voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs), but to use these an interagency fee must be paid, this currently being £27,000 for one child (costs are higher for sibling groups). A reluctance to pay this fee may act as a barrier to interagency placements, affecting particularly those whose characteristics make them 'harder to place'.

In response to these concerns, the government began subsidising the inter-agency fee for a trial period for all children defined as 'harder to place' in 8 July 2015. The groups of children considered as 'harder to place' were those over four years old, disabled children, 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. 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 interagency 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 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?

How was the study done?

This study was carried out in collaboration with seven 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

- Professionals agreed that children included in the subsidy criteria were hard to place, but argued other factors are also important, particularly developmental uncertainties (e.g. 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. They emphasised that it was the severity of children's problems, rather than the category, that was more important.
- Professionals perceived a mis-match between what waiting adopters were able to offer and the needs of waiting children; agencies reported that new recruitment was focused primarily on finding families able to consider children with more complex needs. Family finders were looking for 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 needed 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. Concerns about inter-agency matches were focused more around issues of communication, coordination, information

sharing, professional relationships, and trust between agencies – particularly where large geographical distances were involved.

- 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.
- Both adopters and professionals expressed concerns about the support available to children in inter-agency placements, particularly 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

- 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 to place, were matched within 6 months of placement order. In-house matches were unsurprisingly swifter than external matches.
- Although speed of matching had increased during the subsidy period, it is not possible to say this was a direct result of the subsidy. Agencies reported other influential factors 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; Link Maker becoming established as a routinely used family finding resource .

Changes in family finding practice

- LA managers reported substantial changes in family finding practices, these having been instigated prior to the introduction of the subsidy for the most part. Changes included restructuring of teams and roles to permit a focus on family finding; the strengthening of care planning and monitoring to avoid drift; the earlier identification of children likely to need adoption; and the allocation of family finders to children earlier in the process.
- Participating LAs were at different stages in terms of embedding these restructuring processes but perceived them as having had a real impact on practice. 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: 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, the decision to search externally often being in place before a placement order had been made. For most participating LAs this rapid process had been adopted before the subsidy was introduced.

- Managers emphasised the importance of a thorough and rigorous assessment of children's needs in achieving timely matches and in avoiding disruptions. Potentially avoidable delays could occur when there were uncertainties about plans (reflecting the need for sound assessments). Very significant delays could result when identified adopters subsequently withdrew from a match, or placements disrupted during or shortly after introductions. Managers perceived that the turnover of children's social workers could affect this assessment work.
- Link Maker, exchange days and activity days were all frequently mentioned as useful avenues for family finding, particularly for 'harder to place' children.
- Also important was simple communication with other agencies, be that formal or informal.
- Overall participants felt that the quality of matches had not been affected negatively by the availability of the subsidy. Most said that the subsidy had not made much difference to the way they approached the family finding task. For some however 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.
- 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 relatively brief and temporary initiative of the fee subsidy did not seem to be a strong factor in driving interagency collaborations. VAA managers did not perceive an increase in business 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.
- 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 how fees would work within new regional structures. A variety of suggestions were made about how the inter-agency fee might be restructured.

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.

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. The 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 interagency 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.

FIND OUT MORE

FULL REPORT www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/638885/Inter-agency_Adoption_and_Subsidy_of_the_Inter-Agency_Fee.pdf

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