

RAA Service Development - Service User Engagement and Feedback Summary

Purpose

1. This document provides a summary of engagement and feedback received from adopters, adopted children, birth families, practitioners and other stakeholders with an interest in the development of a regional adoption agency.

Background

2. Given the reconfiguration of adoption services is a requirement of government policy, formal public consultation on whether to proceed was deemed to be of limited value. Due to the specialist nature of the service, targeted engagement with service users regarding how the re-configured service should be delivered was considered to be the most appropriate course of action.

Summary

3. Engagement and feedback from a broad range of stakeholders has been invaluable in shaping service design. Adopters have been passionate in expressing their views and are constructively engaged at various levels highlighting priorities and areas for improvement. The Adopter Voice programme is actively engaging 154 individuals in the Adoption West region, over 20 adopters have provided detailed input through face to face forums and working groups, 8 birth families have provided their feedback, and survey responses have been considered from over 350 adoptive families.
4. Key focus areas for adopters include the range and quality of adoption support, professionalism of staff, clarity of process and information sharing. Adopters consistently highlight the importance of support services to meet the needs of adoptive families and sustain placements. Identified benefits of regionally delivered adoption support services include greater flexibility and accessibility for certain services, joint commissioning opportunities, learning and experience sharing, strengthened peer to peer support, and a range of more efficient delivery options. Other areas highlighted by adopters include the assessment process where there are opportunities for increased adopter involvement, improved availability of training and a focus on adopter choice. The 'Adoptables' peer network of adopted young people has engaged a small group to gather views on what works, what doesn't work so well and how decision-makers can improve service, including how best to support adopted young people at school. Birth families have highlighted barriers to accessing services, issues around contact, life story work and information sharing and potential opportunities for improved support.

Methods

5. Outline proposals for the development of plans to create a regional adoption agency and engage with stakeholders were approved by local authority political decision-making groups in the summer of 2016. A range of focused activity has been undertaken and continues to engage stakeholders to gather views and incorporate feedback into the design of the new service.

6. Engagement has included:

- a. Adopter forums led by Adoption UK have been held across the region to explore specific aspects of service provision and the potential impacts of regionalisation. National feedback collected through the Adopter Voice programme has also been incorporated into service design. Over 20 adopters have engaged through forum events around the region and more events are planned.
- b. A detailed survey of all aspects of current provision inviting views on how these services may be affected and improved by a move to a regional adoption agency. The survey was shared with all adopters on local authority and voluntary agency contact lists and was facilitated by Adoption UK. This survey built on insight from a more comprehensive survey analysis of adoption support completed earlier in the year.
- c. Adopters are active members of a number of service development working groups and adopter champions are being recruited to provide ongoing input into detailed service design and delivery.
- d. The 'Adoptables' programme facilitated by Coram and locally by CCS Adoption has also gathered views of adopted young people. Two events have been held and future engagement of adopted children and young people are planned.
- e. Birth parent engagement has been facilitated by After Adoption through a range of appropriate methods, including surveys/follow up discussions and summary reports produced to inform service design.
- f. Each local authority continues to gather regular feedback on the adoption services they provide and this will be incorporated into future service provision.
- g. An adopter newsletter has provided updates to adopters of developments with the creation of a regional adoption agency.
- h. Practitioners have been communicated with throughout the process by their team managers, team meeting updates, monthly newsletters, practitioner engagement events and involvement in practice development working groups.
- i. Partners and wider stakeholder groups including voluntary adoption agencies adoption support agencies, related health service practitioners and commissioners, education services, panel members have all been engaged through core project activity to develop proposals and will continue to be involved in service design.

Findings

7. Adopter Surveys:

- a. According to a recent survey of our adopters, conducted September to October 2016, services provided were rated as very good or good by 38%, satisfactory by 32%, and poor or very poor by 30% of respondents.

Average rating for current adoption services	
Very Good	6%
Good	32%
Satisfactory	32%
Poor	21%
Very Poor	9%

- b. The range and quality of support services are clearly ranked as the most important aspects of an adoption agency. Furthermore, 50% of adopters rate the range and quality of support as poor or very poor, the most negative rating for any of the services that were asked about.

- c. Key findings of a comprehensive survey of adoption support highlight the ‘excellent knowledge, experience, commitment and support of individual allocated social workers and the quality of training and information’. However, significant weaknesses in provision are also highlighted, including:
 - 54% had not received an adoption support plan prior to placement
 - 31% had not received a life story book
 - 45% had not received a later life letter
 - 49% had not received all the support they required and 11% any of the help required
 - d. The survey also highlights that 83% of respondents had required post adoption support. Over half of the adopters had sought help with their children’s behavioural and/or emotional issues and 43% had requested educational support for their adopted children.
8. Adopter Forums and project working group involvement:
- a. Clear information should be available at the front door (to explain the process and inform choice)
 - b. The Front door should also facilitate direct access to support (specialist workers, information and services)
 - c. Social workers and information should be open and honest up front so Adopters know what is expected of them
 - d. Consistency, reliability and professionalism of social workers is highly valued
 - e. Appreciation of individual circumstances, flexibility and adopter choice is important
 - f. Adoptive parents’ involvement and specialist input should be provided during prospective adopters’ preparation
 - g. The quality of Life Story work, later in life letters and contact should be improved
 - h. Panels are deemed to be costly and of limited added value to the process of assessment and matching
 - i. Developing the model of peer to peer support will be cost-effective and highly valued by adopters
 - j. Improved access to training for adopters and staff should be a priority
 - k. The link between local authority children teams and the regional adoption agency is essential
 - l. Support planning and resourcing should be based on an assumption of need
 - m. RAA s provide a good opportunity to improve data collection, analysis and action to support adopted children, young people and their families (through joined up cross-agency responses)
9. Birth Family survey and focus groups:
- a. Barriers to access include lack of knowledge about the service, not being told of the service at a time that they want to engage, not being given the right information about what the service offers.
 - b. Aspects of the service that are particularly valued include independence of the Service from Children’s Services and the worker making a ‘connection’ with the birth parent
 - c. Issue identified with the inconsistency in information given to birth parents in the forms it is given and when
 - d. Many birth mothers struggled with the number of professionals involved as well as the changeover of staff and reported a sense of not feeling understood, valued or supported

- e. Inconsistency in how Social Workers collect life story information and while the majority of birth parents were clear that they had been asked for and had given information about their children they are often unclear about what happens to this information and what the purpose of giving this information is.
 - f. Birth parents report a lot of difficulties in establishing what contact arrangements are post Adoption and highlight cases where contact should have been arranged but hasn't.
10. Practitioner engagement:
- a. Adoption teams have input into the development of the regional adoption agency through engagement with colleagues involved in project groups, direct involvement in practice development work groups, feedback through team meetings and wider stakeholder events.
 - b. Staff feedback on specific proposals will also be incorporated into service design through formal staff consultation. Key opportunities identified by staff include developing consistent good practice approaches regionally, pooling of resources and joining up central functions, better accessibility and range of services for service users.
 - c. Initial feedback on outline proposals for the reconfigured services has been positive while also highlighting the challenges to embed more flexible working, maintain links with local authority services and achieve positive organisational culture change

Future developments

11. Learning from the experiences to date a number of the methods outlined above will continue to be used to test proposals and monitor feedback to ensure the quality of future service design and delivery. The project team and future management of the regional agency will also address current weaknesses in the areas of special guardian engagement, adult adoptees and continue to consider methods for gathering feedback from children and young people.
12. Specific planned future activities include:
- a. Repeat surveys to monitor changing perceptions / attitudes and assessment of services
 - b. Specific polls on key subjects
 - c. Follow up engagement with adopted children and young people – building on 'adoptables' events
 - d. Social media engagement
 - e. Further adopter forums planned
 - f. Online forum development
 - g. Regional agency website development
 - h. Consolidated adopter contact list to facilitate standardised / consistent direct communications
 - i. Special Guardianship engagement activity
13. The project and new agency once established will continue to engage proactively with all stakeholders and incorporate their views into the continuous development of high quality services.