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## Early Permanence in the Regional Adoption Agencies

May 2018

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For Coram Centre for Early Permanence

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## *Acknowledgements*

We are grateful to staff and managers who responded and participated in the interviews.

Coram is the UK children's charity that has been supporting children for almost 300 years. Coram's mission is to develop, deliver and promote best practice in the care of vulnerable children, young people and their families. Coram provides consultancy in service improvement and research and evaluation for other public and voluntary organisations.

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For information on the new Early Permanence Quality Mark and the Early Permanence Network go to the Coram Centre for Early Permanence website

Early Permanence Quality Mark at: <https://quality-mark.earlypermanence.org.uk/>

Early Permanence Networking Scheme: <https://earlypermanence.org.uk/early-permanence-network>

## Foreword

I am delighted to share with you the findings of the survey of the RAA experience of Early Permanence delivery. The survey reveals an encouraging level of awareness of the crucial importance of cooperation in early permanence planning from the front door between the RAAs and LAs in order to identify children who might benefit from adoption. Early identification and cooperation between LAs and the RAA is essential for children either return to the care of a parents/connected person, or able to be adopted without unnecessary delay.

There is awareness of the systemic issues involved and the importance of engaging child care teams (including Children in Need teams) across the LAs as well as legal teams. This should pave the way for RAAs in development to ensure that early permanence has a central place in planning the interface between LAs and the RAA. All contributors recognised there is more to do to embed early permanence delivery, and opportunities for training and development should be prioritised to ensure that knowledge is up to date, in this fast developing area of practice, and is widely shared.

We are continuing the work of the Early Permanence National Expert Group, chaired by Dr Carol Homden CEO Coram, advocating for national data sets so the sector can understand the process and outcomes as to children returning home or to adoptive families, the numbers of placements made, and the timescales.

This survey was supported by DfE funding alongside launch of the new Early Permanence Quality Mark, helping agencies achieve and sustain best practice. The National Quality Mark is hosted by Coram Centre for Early Permanence and is comprised of a *Working Towards* and the full *Early Permanence Quality Mark Awards*.

Jeanne Kaniuk OBE  
Associate Director  
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## 1 Executive summary

This research project, commissioned by the Early Permanence Expert Working Group, focuses on how early permanence features within the Regional Adoption Agency model. It explores the developments being made in this area of practice, the challenges faced and ways to overcome them.

### 1.1 The research

- A short online survey was distributed to senior managers of 13 Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). Twelve people completed the survey, representing eleven different RAAs, ensuring an extremely high response rate of 85%.
- RAAs surveyed were invited to provide their contact details to answer further questions about early permanence in the RAAs. Of the nine respondents who gave their contact details, six subsequently agreed to take part in a 30-minute telephone interview. This represents 46% of the original sample, again a very positive response rate, especially given the two-tier process.

### 1.2 The findings

- All but one RAA said that their **use of early permanence is set to rise**. This expected rise is due to a range of reasons, including RAAs actively promoting early permanence, their work to improve early alerts and tracking of children within the RAAs, and more local authority (LA) partners adopting early permanence practices.
- All but one RAA said that **early permanence is 'very important'** to their overall strategic development. Early permanence is described as a way to improve outcomes for children and to better meet LAs timeliness targets.
- For most RAAs **early permanence is becoming more central** as they develop and operational issues are clarified. However, a few RAAs described themselves as early permanence advocates, for whom early permanence has shaped operational structures from the outset.
- Overall, respondents described **senior management support** for early permanence within partner local authorities. Although LAs early permanence practices vary considerably, RAAs said that **most senior managers view early permanence positively**.

- While there is little to suggest that specific areas within the social care or legal system are more resistant to or suspicious of early permanence, RAAs described the **need for ‘a shift in thinking’ in order for early permanence to be embedded culturally**, as well as practically.
- Just over half of the RAAs said that they had **experienced no challenges** to delivering early permanence through the RAA model. Just under half said they have indeed encountered challenges, such as recruiting enough early permanence adopters, having to register as an Independent Fostering Agency and some initial reluctance for RAAs to attend Legal Gateway meetings.
- The majority of RAAs *disagreed* with the statement ‘the creation of a new RAA, separate from local authorities, makes it harder to plan for early permanence’. Interviewees highlighted that while the RAA model in theory could present challenges to early permanence, this had been identified as a risk from the outset and **steps had been taken to maintain communication** and to ensure that the RAA is perceived as a shared service, rather than a separate entity.
- Most RAAs have delivered or commissioned some training for RAA and LA staff on early permanence. The **provision of training for all staff across the board was seen as important** to improve early permanence practices of RAAs.
- RAAs identified a range of new practices that they had implemented to promote early permanence, such as ‘opting out’ when recruiting adopters, registering as an Independent Fostering Agency and commissioning services and training. But overall RAAs highlighted that **there is ‘no magic wand’ to changing practices**. Raising awareness and knowledge about early permanence across partner organisations is important and ‘being in there’ at legal gateway and tracking meetings is fundamental to influence LAs at an early stage.

### Early permanence adopters

- Early permanence features highly in RAA internal targets or recruitment strategies of adopters, with the majority of RAAs saying that their **recruitment strategy has a clear focus on early permanence**.
- The majority of RAAs said they make potential adopters aware of early permanence as an option **pre stage 1** – on their website, when adopters ring up and at introduction evenings. This is described as a successful strategy, as adopters are responding positively to the option of early permanence.

- Some RAAs reported a **shortage of early permanence adopters**, in part because of the transition during regionalisation. Respondents highlighted that things such as DVD/recruitment material and positive stories in the media about adopters who have experienced early permanence would help in recruiting more early permanence adopters.

### Support for early permanence

- The majority of RAAs were aware of the updated early permanence good practice guide: ‘The role of Fostering for Adoption in achieving early permanence for children’ (CoramBAAF, 2017), which most described as ‘very useful’.
- One issue raised was the difficulty for adopters to choose early permanence, especially if they are in employment. This was because of the short timeframe involved in placing children in early permanence placements (a few RAAs had placed children within 24 hours). A call for **changes to employment law to allow early permanence adopters more flexibility was suggested**.

## 2 Background to the study

The regionalisation of adoption services forms an important part of the government’s policy to optimise adoption performance, promote cost efficiency and share expertise. Since the publication of DfE’s paper on regionalising adoption in 2015, Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) have and are being established across the country. Bringing together local authorities and voluntary organisations, Regional Adoption Agencies are tasked with the recruitment of adopters, family finding, matching and delivering adoption support.

In 2017 Coram received funding from the Practice and Improvement Fund (Round 1) to work with the Early Permanence Expert Working Group to facilitate consistency and coherence in the delivery of early permanence in adoption. Following significant sector engagement, the programme produced two key publications, a series of seminars and launched a new Quality Mark for early permanence<sup>1</sup>. During the programme, the relationship between early permanence and the Regional Adoption Agencies service model was identified as a key area of interest. The Expert Working Group therefore commissioned Coram’s Impact and Evaluation team to carry out a short overview study with existing Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and those nearing launch to explore how early permanence features within their service design, and the opportunities and challenges that regionalisation presents to early permanence.

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<sup>1</sup> For details see Coram’s Centre for Early Permanence: <https://earlypermanence.org.uk>

## 2.1 Defining early permanence<sup>2</sup>

Early permanence is an umbrella term, which includes both Fostering for Adoption (FfA) and Concurrent Planning placement (CPP). Both approaches involve placing children in foster placements with families who are also approved to adopt them, while the courts consider whether they can safely return to their birth family or whether they might need to be adopted.

- Concurrent Planning placements: the carers are dually approved as both foster carers and adopters.
- Fostering for Adoption placements: since 2014 the Agency Decision Maker can temporarily approve adopters as foster carers for a particular child during proceedings.

The overarching aim of early permanence is to give children stability in their lives by avoiding repeat moves and broken attachments. Instead of placing the uncertainty on children, adult carers are asked to manage the risks and possibility of loss. While early permanence is mostly used with children under the age of two years, it is not limited to this age group.

## 3 The research

The main aim of this research project is to explore and assess how early permanence features within the Regional Adoption Agency model. It also addresses the following research questions:

- To what extent does the creation of a new regional agency, separate from local authorities, present challenges or opportunities to delivering early permanence?
- How does early permanence (including concurrency and fostering for adoption) fit into the planned service model of the Regional Adoption Agencies?
- Is the use of early permanence set to change across the Regional Adoption Agencies?
- What solutions have the Regional Adoption Agencies found to any obstacles identified?
- How do the Regional Adoption Agencies make early permanence a visible option to adopters?
- How has the Regional Adoption Agencies addressed or incorporated the updated '*Early Permanence Good Practice Guide: the Role of Fostering for Adoption in achieving early permanence for children*' (CoramBAAF, 2017)?
- What further support does the Regional Adoption Agencies require with regard to early permanence?

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<sup>2</sup> This definition derives from Coram's Centre for Early Permanence:  
<https://earlypermanence.org.uk/faqs/>

### 3.1 Research methods

The study used the following methods for data collection:

- An online survey completed by senior managers within the RAAs (N=12).

To facilitate a good response rate, the survey was deliberately kept short (18 questions), but addressed key information about the RAAs experiences of early permanence, perceived challenges and opportunities to deliver early permanence, and the recruitment of early permanence adopters. A link to the survey was sent to 13 Regional Adoption Agencies from a list of senior contacts provided by DfE.

Twelve people completed the survey, representing eleven different RAAs, ensuring an extremely high response rate of 85%. This positive response rate suggests a high level of interest within RAAs about early permanence.

- Telephone interviews with senior managers within the RAAs (N=6).

Respondents completing the survey were invited to provide their contact details in order to answer more detailed questions about the role of early permanence within the RAAs. Of the nine respondents who gave their contact details, six subsequently agreed to take part in a 30-minute telephone interview. This represents 46% of the original sample, again a very positive response rate, especially given the two-tier recruitment process.

### 3.2 The research participants

The survey link was sent to senior managers within the Regional Adoption Agencies. While a few forwarded the request to colleagues who were better placed to answer questions, all who completed the questionnaire were either senior managers or at managerial level, such as head of service, service manager, lead or team managers.

Most regions in England were represented in the survey, except the South East, East of England and London. Two-thirds of the Regional Adoption Agencies were Cohort 1 agencies and the remaining one-third Cohort 2. Three RAAs were still at the planning and implementation stage with launch dates planned for later in 2018, but the majority of RAAs were already 'live'. Their start dates ranged between April 2017 and April 2018.

## 4 The role of early permanence in the Regional Adoption Agencies

The RAAs have on average placed 14 children in early permanence placements in 2017/18. However, this figure varies markedly between four and 30 early permanence placements, depending on individual RAAs, their size and when they went 'live'.

In ten of the eleven RAAs the use of early permanence is set to rise, while in one it is likely to stay the same. This expected rise is contributed to a range of factors, including RAAs actively promoting early permanence, their work to improve early alerts and tracking of children, and more local authority partners adopting early permanence practices.

*We have some extremely successful local authorities in this area and some who require more support. We have targets to increase this number in coming years and are working closely with local authorities to achieve this.* (Head of RAA)

The study shows that early permanence has a high prominence within Regional Adoption Agencies. Ten of the eleven RAAs responding to the survey said that early permanence was 'very important' to their RAAs overall strategic development – with only one saying it was 'moderately important'.

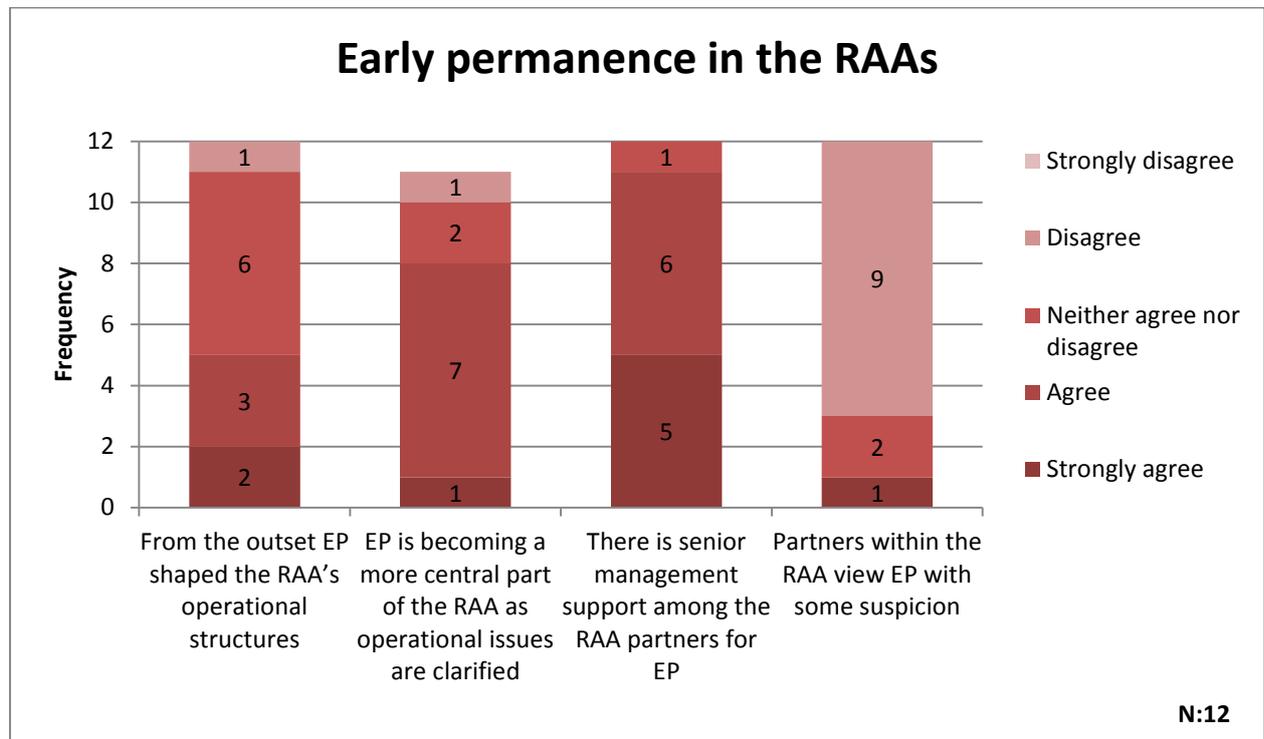
However, the findings also suggest that early permanence is becoming more central to most Regional Adoption Agencies as operational issues are clarified (see figure 1 below). For a few RAAs, who are best described as early permanence advocates or champions, early permanence has shaped their operational structures from the outset. But most RAAs had found that early permanence practices were gaining importance as their agency developed.

It is clear from the study that across the RAAs there is senior management support for early permanence among partners (see figure 1). One respondent, for example, described all their local authority partners as 'committed' to early permanence, even though 'practice is patchy'. This is a positive finding, as it suggests that although some local authorities are still developing their approach to early permanence, there is senior management support for developments in this area of practice.

In similar terms only one RAA agreed with the statement 'partners within the RAA view early permanence with some suspicion'. When asked to clarify this position during the follow-up interview, the lead manager highlighted that in her experience it was more about partners being 'nervous' about early permanence, rather than being suspicious:

*I think once we have seen it work effectively it becomes endemic really, when people get to know how it works and they see the benefits of it, and the more you do it, the less nervous people get about it and the more embedded it becomes in practice.* (Lead Manager of RAA)

Figure 1.



#### 4.1 Challenges and obstacles to early permanence

Of the eleven RAAs who participated in the survey, five reported having experienced *no challenges* to delivering early permanence through the regional agency service model, four said they had indeed encountered challenges, while the remaining three said it was too early to know as they were not yet operational. The RAAs highlighted that different local authority contexts and their variable experiences of delivering early permanence could present challenges to early permanence. While some local authority partners were very confident and experienced, and with a long record of making early permanence placements, others were only just now beginning to consider early permanence as an option for their children. This was a factor highlighted by most RAAs, even those that did not perceive it as a challenge to early permanence.

To accommodate these variations, the RAAs had adopted different ways of working with individual local authorities depending on their context and their level of experience. There was nevertheless a strong recognition that RAAs were playing an instrumental role in supporting all of their local authority partners, especially those that currently are placing fewer children in early permanence placement and who need more support in this area of practice. In addition, given their intermediary role in relation to local authority partners, RAAs are also ideally placed to facilitate sharing and learning between partners.

Other challenges to early permanence were also highlighted, such as recruiting enough early permanence adopters, limited knowledge about early permanence and having to navigate different local authorities' procedures. One RAA was registering as an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) in order for the RAA to approve and support the fostering element of early permanence placements, but this had created additional work and bureaucracy during the implementation period. Some initial resistance to early permanence among local authorities' legal teams was also identified as challenging.

Any potential resistance from specific parts of the social care or legal system was explored in more depth during the follow up interviews. Overall, no specific area of resistance to early permanence was identified, but RAAs highlighted that increasing awareness and knowledge about early permanence across the board was paramount to improving early permanence practices. Because early permanence was perceived to be a new and more child-centred way of working, this required a shift in thinking about children's permanence, as well as a shift in how different teams work together to improve outcomes for children. To increase the number of early permanence placements made, it was said that everyone within the RAA, the local authorities and the courts need to understand what early permanence is, the benefits to children and when it is appropriate. This includes frontline social workers, but also senior management, finance and legal advisors. While this process was already happening in some local authorities, others were still very new to early permanence and needed to better integrate it into their way of operating - across both their systems and people.

#### 4.2 Opportunities to delivering early permanence

Training and raising awareness plays a significant role in facilitating the process and most RAAs have delivered or commissioned some training for RAAs and local authority staff on early permanence. However, most acknowledged that more training was needed, especially in agencies that have just launched or were nearing their start date and in local authorities with high staff turnover. Training adoption support workers to understand and support early permanence placements was also described as essential, as they play a key role in promoting early permanence messages through the conversations they have with potential adopters.

RAAs were frequently working with their Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) partners to deliver training on early permanence, but capacity to train both adopters and staff across their region was identified as an issue. Two RAAs mentioned that their VAA partners have received funding via DfE's Practice and Improvement Fund for training and support, which was expected to improve capacity.

When asked what they, as Regional Adoption Agencies, have put in place to deliver early permanence, responses focused on their work to:

- Develop early identification and tracking systems.

- Improve policies and procedures
- Train staff and adopters to raise awareness and knowledge about early permanence.
- Provide consistent fostering support to early permanence adopters.
- Produce new promotional material for adopters.
- Provide staff with new templates and resource packs.

A few RAAs had implemented new approaches to early permanence, such as requiring adopters to ‘opt-out’ of early permanence, rather than opt-in, or to register as an Independent Fostering Agency themselves to reduce their reliance on local authorities to approve adopters as foster careers. Some RAAs highlighted their aspiration to develop more consistency and standardisation around how they deliver and support early permanence, and were consequently producing flow charts or guidance to help facilitate a more consistent approach.

However, overall the study suggests that there is ‘no magic wand’ to changing early permanence practices. Raising awareness and knowledge about early permanence across partner organisations is important, as is the interface between the RAAs and local authority partners.

*‘I think we have done a lot of thinking about [early permanence], but I don’t think there is a magic wand. I think it is about understanding, a cultural shift; it’s about your systems, your senior management understanding it as well as the social workers on the ground, and your legal advisors. I think it is a process ...’* (Head of RAA)

#### 4.3 The RAA model - interface between RAAs and LAs

Within the adoption sector, concerns have been expressed that the regional adoption agency model, with its division of responsibilities between those who deliver fostering and those who deliver adoption, could be a potential hindrance to the development of early permanence. However, when asked directly the majority of RAAs did not agree with these concerns. Nine out of eleven RAAs disagreed with the statement ‘The creation of a new RAA, separate from local authorities, makes it harder to plan for early permanence’. Only one respondent agreed.

The study shows that regional adoption agencies do not necessarily perceive themselves as ‘separate’ from their local authority partners. This potential disconnect between local authorities and their RAA was identified as a risk factor from the outset of the regionalisation process. Senior managers within in the RAAs (who often are seconded from or previously worked for one of the local authority partners) have therefore given much thought to how best to develop the interface between the RAAs and each of their local authority partners. Some RAAs have implemented a ‘spoke and hub’ model to ensure they have a visual presence within local authorities, while others have introduced

strategies to ensure that links are maintained and that local authorities view their regional adoption agency as a 'shared service'.

*We have always talked about the need to stay really well connected to our local authorities... when the RAAs were conceived right at the beginning people were saying 'what are the things we need to be careful about here?', because that is one of the things that we have to be really careful about... That is one of the reasons that we are set up the way we are, to allow [those connections] to happen. (Head of RAA)*

*For us it is more about planning for the child, rather than being co-located... There is a risk of us becoming separated or isolated, but we are doing everything to make sure that we are not... so from our perspective I don't think it is having an impact. (Service manager)*

*I think initially the local authorities properly thought that it was going to be a challenge, and wanted to say 'it is your agency – get on with it', but actually we have managed to make it a shared service and the management board has been really clear that this is a shared responsibility, and you really need to work together to make sure that we don't lose anything. We have had real benefits of being co-located, so if we are not co-located we have to work hard to maintain those relationships. (Head of RAA)*

Regular and ongoing attendance at meetings within each of the local authorities, such as Legal Gateway meetings, admission to care meeting, accommodation panels, tracking meetings and the equivalent, play a central role both in maintaining links between the RAA and local authority partners, and in the early identification of children for whom early permanence may be an option. The RAAs described attending such meetings as a key priority for them as they provided the RAAs with early alerts about children coming into the system, as well as opportunities to influence local authorities to consider early permanence in their care planning for children.

*As a RAA you kind of need to 'be in there' before, to be aware of the children who are coming in – so legal gateway meetings or whatever they are called – where each local authority are looking at a public law outline, looking at case proceedings, pre-birth assessments – we need to be in there to have a good idea of the children coming through, so we can flag those potential cases where we think it might be a good one to think about early permanence. If we have the ability to influence and talk to local authorities about that at an early stage that is to the advantage of children. (Head of RAA)*

One RAA had specific permanence coordinators who attended local authority meetings, while in others, it was the lead or senior managers who attended meetings. One RAA identified some initial reluctance among local authorities to involve regional agency staff in their Legal Gateway meetings, and it has therefore taken time for this practice to

become embedded. But overall local authorities were open to RAAs attending meetings and for them to discuss early permanence as an option for their children.

In summary, the regional adoption agency model in itself was not seen to present a challenge to early permanence, as long as specific attention was paid to the interface between the regional agency and local authorities, which enabled them to maintain relationships and allowed for the early identification of children.

#### 4.4 Recruiting early permanence adopters

Adopters coming through the RAAs are evidently being made aware of the option of early permanence placements early in the recruitment process. Ten RAAs said that they provided information about early permanence to potential adopters pre Stage 1, for example on their website, through their marketing material, when adopters ring up and at information evenings. This was a relatively new practice that RAAs across the country were implementing, and because of this most RAAs had developed recruitment material for adopters that specifically included information about early permanence.

However, it was also an on-going process, with adopters being given information about early permanence throughout their approval process. Some RAAs run regional training days for people interested in early permanence, with a specific focus on issues related to early permanence, such as birth family contact and the risk of loss.

Early permanence seemed to feature highly in RAAs internal targets or recruitment strategies. Eight RAAs, for example, said that their adoption recruitment strategy had a clear focus on early permanence.

While it is still too early for most RAAs involved in the study, to assess whether early information is having an effect, the RAAs all reported that adopters were responding positively to the option of early permanence placements.

*I would say that the proportion of people interested in early permanence has gone up, because they can see the benefit for the children, but also potentially for the adopters to get a child that is younger. (Head of RAA)*

Some RAAs reported a shortage of early permanence adopters, in part because of the transition during regionalisation. In order to increase uptake, one RAA had adopted an 'opt-out' model, where potential adopters are asked to opt-out of early permanence, rather than opt-in.

*Before, where you kind of opted-in, people were quite nervous about it so people probably didn't. If you actively have to opt-out we are hoping that we will create a culture where people are quite open to it, because of the positive messages. We are seeing that now, of more families who are willing to consider it. (Head of RAA)*

The actual number of early permanence adopters recruited by 'live' RAAs varied between 3 and 17, but as some have been operational for less than two months this

variation is to be expected. What also seems clear is that RAAs are predominately recruiting adopters for Fostering for Adoption placements, rather than adopters for Concurrency Planning placements. One RAA does use a high number of concurrent placements for their children, but does so via a commissioned Voluntary Adoption Agency partner. Internally, this RAA only recruits Fostering for Adoption adopters, but refers any adopters interested in concurrent planning to their voluntary partner. This trend may be because Local Authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies currently feel more comfortable with Fostering for Adoption, as they perceive concurrent planning as the more 'risky' option of the two.

One issue raised by RAAs is the difficulties adopters in employment face when choosing early permanence. Because of the short timeframe involved in placing children in early permanence placements – a few RAAs have placed children within 24 hours – working adopters struggle with the notice period required by their workplace. A call for changes to employment law was suggested, to ensure that carers have the same entitlements as adopters and parents from the outset of the placements.

*Some adopters cannot give up work without 28 days' notice and/or lose salary if full notice is not served. Having funding to cover this or a change in employment law might make a difference. (Lead manager of RAA)*

In terms of what can be done to help RAAs recruit more early permanence adopters, respondents also mentioned things like good quality recruitment material and DVD training material to share with prospective and approved adopters. More promotion of early permanence in the media, including positive stories about adopters who have experienced early permanence, would also support the recruitment of early permanence adopters.

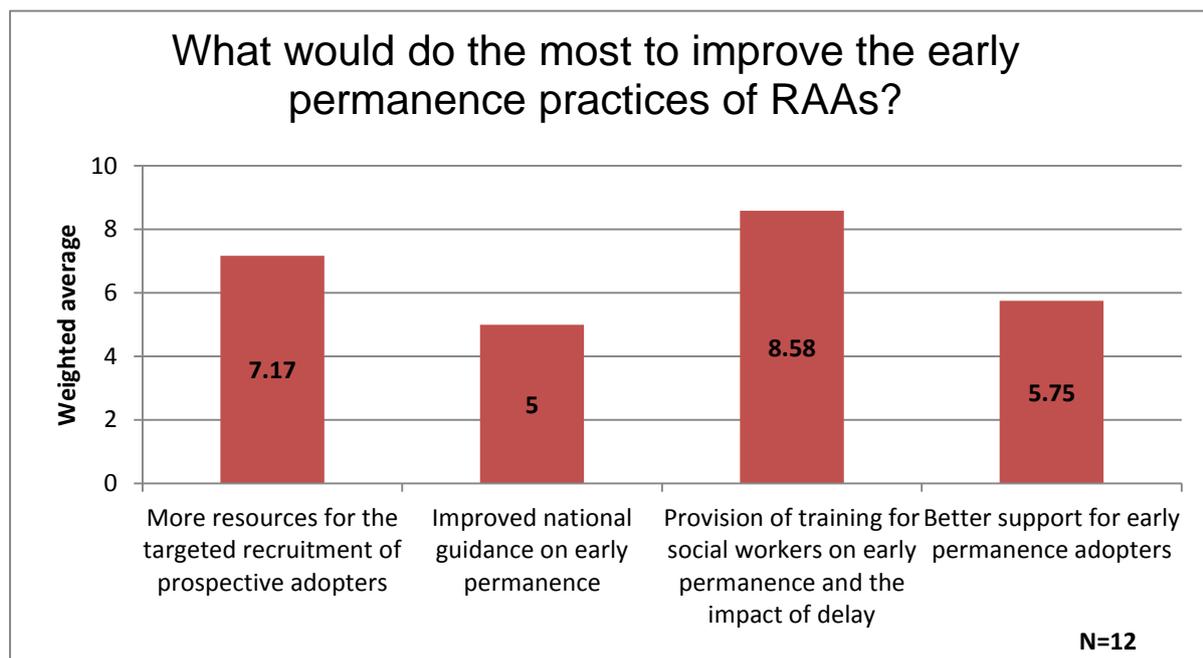
#### 4.5 Further support for early permanence

Senior managers of the RAAs were asked to rate what would do the most to improve early permanence practices of RAAs<sup>3</sup>. As seen in figure 2, the 'provision of training for social workers about early permanence' would have the highest impact, followed by 'more resources for the targeted recruitment of adopters'. This shows that the RAAs have identified a high training need for staff, including social workers.

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<sup>3</sup> On a 0 – 10 scale, where a score of 10 represents 'top priority' and 0 'no priority'.

Figure 2



The majority of RAAs claimed to be aware of the updated early permanence good practice guide: 'The role of Fostering for Adoption in achieving early permanence for children' (CoramBAAF, 2017), which most described as 'very useful'. Among the newly established RAAs, all were aware of the publication, which suggests it is more likely to be used in the early stages of forming the RAA.

When asked what central government can do to help RAAs improve early permanence practices, the RAAs highlighted areas such as, funding for the provision of training for children's guardians and the judiciary, national standards regarding fees and changes to employment law.

From the voluntary sector, RAAs also suggested activities that could support their work, such as the provision of mentors or co-organising mini conferences in the regions to encouraging shared learning.

## 5. Next steps

Throughout this study, RAA service managers spoke passionately about the importance of early permanence in improving children's outcomes. From their perspective, the RAAs play a significant role in promoting early permanence to their own staff, to their local authority partners and staff, and to the sector more widely.

Early permanence is perceived as a more child-centred approach, which needs to be embedded culturally, as well as practically within the RAAs and local authority systems and people. Currently, early permanence is mainly considered for younger children and

mainly through Fostering for Adoption placements. However, a few RAAs stressed the need to think about early permanence in broader terms, such as how to secure early permanence for older children, or children where there is a change of plan, or to consider slightly different models into permanence. While these are important 'next steps', the majority of Regional Adoption Agencies are presently focused on consolidating and embedding early permanence practices across their region.