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Evaluation of Early Permanence Projects

Final report

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Glossary

ASW	Adoption Social Worker
CAFCASS	Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service
CSW	Children’s Social Worker
EP	Early Permanence
FfA	Fostering for Adoption
IRO	Independent Reviewing Officer
LA	Local Authority
RAA	Regional Adoption Agency
VAA	Voluntary Adoption Agency

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Executive Summary

Background to the research:

- Early Permanence (EP) is an umbrella term referring to situations where children are placed with foster carers who are also approved to adopt them should the plan for adoption approved via a placement and adoption order.
- Early Permanence includes both concurrency and fostering for adoption (FfA); both types of placement are typically used for very young children.
- The key aim is to have the child's permanent placement settled at as young an age as possible, avoiding potential placement moves within the care system, and the disruption of separation from foster carers to move to a different family who will adopt.
- Early Permanence has the potential to build children's resilience in two main ways. Firstly, through reducing additional risks in their early life such as delay and placement moves, and secondly through promoting the key protective factors of stable early attachment and caregiver commitment.
- The existing research highlights that Early Permanence can be beneficial for children, but that both parents and EP carers may experience additional stresses because of the uncertainty about decisions regarding the child. These tensions can come to the fore during contact (family time) meetings.
- On the other hand, where carers and parents have frequent opportunities to meet around contact meetings, there are opportunities for them to start to build a positive relationship that could go on to facilitate meaningful contact between the adoptive family and the birth parents in the future.
- It is now 12 years since the initial government drive to get more children placed earlier in their lives via Early Permanence schemes. Legislation has been updated, practice guidance has been published, and knowledge and learning has evolved through experience. While EP placements have increased year on year, there is still significant variation across the country in the use of the scheme.
- Adoption England launched the Early Permanence grants programme in 2022. Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and their partnerships could apply for funding to implement projects that aimed to improve EP systems, processes, and practice at local, regional, or national level.
- 19 projects received funding to implement a wide variety of activities to improve EP systems and practice between April 2022 and March 2025. This report evaluates 11 of these.

- Adoption England commissioned the evaluation partnership from the University of East Anglia and the Institute of Public Care, Oxford Brookes University to explore how EP grants were implemented and early evidence of impact. The evaluation was designed to generate high-level learning from implementation and stakeholders' perspectives on impact.

Methods used in the evaluation

- The 19-month evaluation began in **December 2023**, focusing primarily on ongoing Early Permanence (EP) projects.
- Ethical approval was secured via Oxford Brookes University.
- For ongoing projects, initial meetings and **Theory of Change workshops** (mostly online) were held with each project team to define goals, mechanisms, and expected outcomes.
- Agencies received support to develop or refine **data collection tools** including feedback forms gathering information from professionals and EP carers to assess their views of training or services offered.
- **Quarterly check-ins** and **EP statistics collection** were conducted. EP statistics included data on children referred, placed and adopted, adopter approvals and project specific metrics (e.g. website review, referrals for support services).
- **Interviews** with project teams, stakeholders, and EP carers occurred between **January and June 2025**. This final report draws together stakeholders' experiences of implementation and perceptions on effectiveness and impact based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 50 professionals and 3 with EP carers. **Project reports** (quarterly and final reports to Adoption England) were reviewed when available.
- The collection of statistics and data collection tools from projects was very patchy as projects did not always have the resources to provide these. **Therefore, the evaluation is primarily based on the views of those working in the projects.**

Key Findings

Projects varied in their scope and aims. Activities fell into six main areas and most projects worked across several areas of activity. Findings across the six main areas are summarised below:

1. Implementation of EP lead and/or champions

- Employment of EP support worker
- Employment of EP lead/manager

- o Identification and support of EP champions in each Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) and/or local authority (LA)

EP leads seemed to have a crucial impact on driving and sustaining practice development, but their value was reduced when their role was constrained by other demands or was time limited.

Regarding EP champions, the impact they had appeared to depend on how much time individuals were able to commit to the role, and how pro-active they were in being involved in networking and practice development meetings.

2. Development of resources, training and/or guidance for social workers and wider stakeholders

- o best practice guidance, including around implementation of fostering regulations
- o leaflets and resource packs for professionals
- o EP conferences, development days and/or training events for social workers
- o EP working groups or advice surgeries
- o Offer of therapeutic support for social workers.

Training for social workers appeared beneficial but regular, rolling training was needed to keep the changing workforce knowledgeable about EP. Resources were produced by nearly all the projects, and some of these were either very similar or overlapped significantly, suggesting unnecessary repetition could be reduced if a more strategic national approach was taken. There did not seem to be a demand for therapeutic support for social workers, and the value of this approach is unproven.

3. Changes/additions to recruitment, training, preparation and available resources for prospective EP carers

- o marketing campaigns
- o development of information packs or resources to support new training
- o review and amendment of existing training materials and development of new training offers

Comprehensive and revised training and preparation for EP carers was perceived as beneficial, and benefits could be maximised by sharing of resources across agencies. The co-ordination and delivery of training was a task which required ongoing oversight, however, particularly when delivered pan-regionally, with concerns this would be difficult without an EP lead in place.

4. Increased/targeted support for EP carers

- o facilitation of peer support groups
- o development of a buddy scheme linking new EP carers with experienced EP carers
- o provision of independent support/counselling
- o training social workers in Developmental Dyadic Psychotherapy (DDP)

Overall, this appeared to be a very promising activity area which could positively impact the overall support offer to carers and the child's experience, and would go some way to address some of the concerns that professionals raised about the emotional impact of EP on carers. Furthermore, professionals argued that the offer of support could also incentivise people to consider EP where they may not otherwise have done so.

5. Enhanced support and visibility for birth parents

- o referral of birth parents to independent support providers
- o work to incorporate birth parents' voices into agency materials
- o development of an animation to explain EP to birth parents

Impact in this area was limited. The findings underscore the importance of identifying strategies to overcome barriers to engaging birth parents and ensuring they receive appropriate support throughout the EP period. Additionally, there is a need to recognise and encompass the valuable role birth parents can play in shaping and contributing to EP practice and its ongoing development.

6. Implementation of new data/tracking/audit systems

- o development of data spreadsheets for local authorities to complete
- o audit tools to assess the use of Early Permanence
- o organised systems for identifying Early Permanence matches such as linking spreadsheets and exploring the use of Link Maker

In areas where improvements were made in data tracking, there was a positive impact in terms of those areas having a better overview of how EP was being used, which could support practice development. Many projects faced significant challenges however in collecting accurate EP data and therefore impact was more limited. This remains an area which requires further focus and improvement.

Key areas of impact

The overall key successes identified across projects included:

- **A dedicated focus kept EP ‘on the table’ with ongoing momentum**, which had an overall positive impact on EP practice.
- Practice development was being **driven by experienced and knowledgeable EP leads**.
- Some areas reported **an increase in children placed in EP**. But stable numbers of EP placements and declining numbers were also observed in other areas. Overall, the national figures suggest numbers of EP placements may have increased slightly over the project timescales.
- An **increase in the number of adopters willing to consider EP** was reported in many areas.
- **EP carers were better prepared for the EP role** by having access to improved and more robust preparation training in many regions.
- The **additional support needs of EP carers were acknowledged and met** through a variety of support services.
- **Opportunities for sharing learning and good practice** through networking and collaboration.
- **Closer working relationships** which led to increased matching in some areas.

Barriers and challenges experienced across the projects

- **Making changes across a large area and several agencies was difficult**, particularly when there was not a history of collaboration in place.
- **Declining numbers of approved adopters was highly challenging**. This sometimes meant that carers approved for Early Permanence were offered and accepted a match with children not on the EP route.
- **There was duplication in the production of new materials**. Projects also reported finding it difficult to discover and access practitioner resources.
- **Some projects needed to change their activities and objectives** as original goals were not feasible. Some project leads felt that more guidance at the bidding and project development stage would have been helpful.
- **Short-term funding was felt to limit sustainability**.

- **Efforts to improve services for birth parents were generally not successful.**

Recommendations and conclusions

From the findings, several recommendations have been made.

Recommendations for Adoption England include:

- Employment of a national EP Practice and Development Lead in Adoption England
- Standardised data tracking
- National offer of therapeutic support to EP carers
- Easily accessible resources and strategic dissemination
- National EP training for social workers and wider stakeholders
- Establishing a lead/project group to work with birth parents to further work on engaging and supporting birth parents, co-produce any new resources needed and maximise the dissemination and use of existing resources.
- Building evaluation in from the start of projects

Recommendations for RAAs, VAAs and local authorities include:

- Employment of an EP lead in each RAA/VAA.
- A focus on improving practice with birth parents within each RAA, drawing on the work at a national level.
- Implementation of EP champions in each local authority.
- Ensuring there is an offer of robust and consistent EP training for prospective adopters.
- Recognising the additional support needs of EP carers and offering basic and higher-level support.

It is recommended that in order to build on the successes of these projects, and address some of the challenges faced, the Department for Education continue to fund development work on EP.

Conclusion

The evaluation highlights the value of sustained, coordinated efforts to embed EP practice nationally. While the projects demonstrated innovation and impact, long-term success depends on continued investment, strategic leadership, and consistent implementation across regions.

Introduction

This evaluation was commissioned by Adoption England as part of wider evaluation of development activity in support of the National Adoption Strategy: Achieving Excellence Everywhere (2021).

A total of 19 projects were provided with additional funding from April 2022 to undertake development work to improve Early Permanence practice. Project funding ranged from one year to three years. Of the 19 projects, 11 project sites were included in this evaluation (seven of those where funding was ongoing until March 2025, and four completed or near completed projects identified for inclusion by Adoption England). The evaluation was undertaken across a 19-month period between December 2023 and June 2025.

This report is split into six main sections. The first foregrounds the evaluation in the wider literature on Early Permanence, the second outlines the methodology used and the limitations of this, and the third provides a brief overview of each project and their challenges and successes. Section four reports the overall findings of the evaluation, organised by activity area. Finally, section five offers further discussion and makes several recommendations and suggestions for Adoption England and Regional Adoption Agencies for future consideration.

1. Background to the research

1.1 What is Early Permanence

Early Permanence is an umbrella term used when talking about certain types of adoption placements for babies or toddlers. The placements enable a child in care, usually under the age of two, to be placed with foster carers who are also approved adoptive parents who are ready and willing to adopt the child if the courts decide to award a placement order. (DFE, 2021, p. 34)

Early Permanence encompasses two unique routes to adoption – ‘concurrency’ and ‘Fostering for Adoption’ (FfA). Both routes involve prospective adopters fostering a child for the duration of care proceedings, with a view to adopting them if this is the final permanency decision made by the court. This contrasts with ‘traditional’ adoption where a child is placed after a Placement Order has been made (which authorises the local authority to place a child for adoption).

Concurrency was established in the USA in the 1980s and was piloted in England in the early 90s with three projects around the country (Monck et al 2003, 2005). In concurrency, prospective adopters are dually approved as foster carers. Under this scheme, there is a parallel plan for the child – Plan A, supporting birth parents with the aim of reunification and Plan B, adoption by the concurrent carers. The primary aim of concurrency is for the child to be returned to birth family: “*Concurrent planning requires the identification and delivery of a detailed rehabilitation plan while the child is placed with carers who are approved for both fostering and adoption who support that plan.*” (Simmonds, 2013, p. 6).

In a drive to tackle delay in placing children with permanent carers, the Department for Education (DfE) introduced ‘**Fostering for Adoption**’ (FfA) (DfE 2011, DfE, 2013). Under FfA arrangements, prospective adopters are usually approved on a temporary basis for a specific child (under regulation 24a of the Children and Families Act, 2014), rather than having approval as a foster carer for any child. The local authority’s primary plan with FfA is adoption (subject to court agreement) unless anything significant changes for the birth family during court proceedings. The Children and Families Act (2014) introduced a duty on local authorities to consider placing a child in an EP placement, alongside other placement options, when adoption is being considered. In the UK, the implementation and focus of EP schemes more recently has been in the form of FfA (Ludvigsen, 2018; Brown and Mason, 2021), but the umbrella term Early Permanence is now used more widely.

In both concurrency and fostering for adoption, Early Permanence carers, like all other foster carers, must adhere to fostering regulations. They hold no legal parental responsibility for the child and are not party to care proceedings.

The use of Early Permanence has increased in recent years, from 14% of adoptions in 2020/21 to 23% in 2023/24 (Coram, 2021; 2024), though this dropped to 17% in 2024/2025 (Coram, 2025). There are strong regional variations in use of EP however, for example in London, EP placements were 16% of adoptions in 24/25 vs. 25% in the South East (Coram, 2024). This regional variation is one reason why Early Permanence was identified as a key area for practice improvement (Department for Education, 2022). Early Permanence is primarily used for young babies and children under the age of two (often from birth), although there are no restrictions on it being used for older children. Most Early Permanence placements do result in the child being adopted, with the estimated number of children reunified being around 4% (Brown & Mason, 2021).

Early Permanence links to Adoption England's outcomes (outcome 4) - "Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively."

1.2 Building children's resilience through Early Permanence

A key benefit of these schemes is that they offer the child stability, reducing the negative impact of placement changes. The new carers are better able to build strong attachment and bonding with children, which will help to later reduce adoption breakdowns. (DfE, 2021)

There are very few peer-reviewed journal articles that address the experience, impact and outcomes of Early Permanence for children, birth parents and EP carers, or professionals' thoughts on the scheme. The most recent published study is that of Brown and Mason (2021) who undertook an independent evaluation of EP in England, including an evaluation of the evidence base in relation to EP. As Brown and Mason have already provided a comprehensive overview of the literature, we do not repeat that here. Instead, we suggest a theoretical framework for understanding how Early Permanence can contribute to children's resilience.

Resilience refers to an individual's capacity to cope with or recover from stress or adversity (Masten, 2025). It is a capacity that is acquired because of protective factors available to the individual. The protective factors that can help build a person's resilience operate at multiple levels. There are individual factors such as an easy-going temperament, talents, or intelligence. Children are also affected by protective factors in their environment, examples being good educational experiences, supportive relationships outside of the family, good community facilities. Several key factors in building resilience operate at the family level - particularly of relevance to Early Permanence is the protective effect of experiencing continuous and secure attachment relationships with parental figures. Parents have a key role in buffering risks for their children and helping them build the internal characteristics (such as hope and optimism, self-esteem and self-efficacy) and social skills that will equip them to cope with challenges they may meet later in life (Masten, 2025).

Adopted children can experience many risks to their development including genetic risks, in utero harm, exposure to neglect or abuse, poor quality and discontinuous attachment relationships, and loss and identity issues stemming from separation from the birth family (Neil et al, 2020). These risk factors mean that they are at higher risk of developmental problems including emotional and behavioural difficulties, neurodevelopmental difficulties, and attachment problems. The more risks children encounter, the greater the chance of them being negatively affected. Building children's resilience is dependent both on reducing exposure to risks and strengthening protective factors (Rutter, 2015).

If children are placed early with carers who will go on to adopt them, they can benefit from developing continuous, secure attachment relationships from a young age. They will also avoid the risk of experiencing placement moves within the care system, and the loss of attachment relationships with foster carers when moving to adoption. This is important as staying more than 12 months in foster care (not with carers who went on to adopt), having more than one foster home, and children being described as very distressed on moving from foster care to adoption are all factors that have been found to independently predict poorer outcomes for adopted children (Neil et al, 2020). Children adopted through concurrency programmes have been found to experience fewer moves before adoption, and less time in in-permanent care (Monck et al, 2004; Laws et al, 2013), thus reducing risk exposure.

A key goal of adoption is to provide children with legal, residential and relational permanence. Relational permanence (Palacios et al, 2019) involves the child developing a secure primary attachment to their caregiver and other family members, the caregivers reciprocal bonding to the child and their unqualified lifelong commitment to him or her, and the members of the family having a sense of permanently belonging to each other.

A key English study sheds some light the role of Early Permanence in achieving relational permanence for children. This research followed up 57 children adopted through the Coram concurrency programme between 2000-2011, with 28 parents being followed up at least two years after placement when the children were aged between 3 - 11 years old (Laws et al, 2013). Twelve of these families took part in a further study in 2017-18 when the children were aged between 7-15 (Ponomerenko et al., 2018). Key findings included:

- None of the adoptions were found to have disrupted.
- One third of the children were doing very well; one third had minor support needs, one third had higher support needs
- The two children who took part in 2018 both expressed high levels of happiness with their lives and closeness to their adoptive parents
- All carers showed a deep commitment to their children (stemming from a positive relationship with their child) when facing parenting difficulties.

The qualitative data from parents capture this quality of ‘relational permanence’:

For all of us, just being there from... as early as you could have been... that offers stability, and you bond and you've got history together, and that's what families have, isn't it? Sam likes nothing better than saying 'look at my baby photos' and 'what did I do as a baby?' and I feel so blessed that we had them as babies and they've been part of our lives. (Adoptive parent in Laws et al, 2013, p. 14)

A caveat around these findings is that there is not yet research that has followed children in Early Permanence placements through to adulthood. The age range of children in this follow-up was wide, and the sample small.

1.3 Carers, parents and the contact experience

The motivations of Early Permanence carers are like those of traditional adopters - the desire to become parents (Kelly et al., 2007; Mannion et al., 2023). EP is usually introduced to prospective adopters after they have started to consider adoption; they therefore then have to ‘buy into’ the approach, shifting their mindset to being a foster carer (Brown and Mason, 2021, p.47). The overview of research by Brown and Mason notes that for adoptive parents, the Early Permanency route to adoption is an emotional journey marked by uncertainty (particularly about whether the child will stay permanently), but that most feel like the child’s parent prior to the granting of the placement and adoption order. Kenrick (2010) refers to this as the “rollercoaster of uncertainty”. This uncertainty is associated with anxiety and stress (Monck, et al, 2004; Mannion et al, 2023), but peer support has been found to be helpful (Mannion et al, 2023).

For carers, birth family contact can increase feelings of uncertainty (Pagé et al, 2019; Goldberg et al, 2012). When babies appear stressed by contact, this adds to carers’ stress (Monck et al., 2003; Kelly et al., 2007). Carers in the Coram study (Laws et al, 2013) identified that having a baby placed so young and the opportunity to meet and get to know birth parents were advantages of the scheme. This helped them with feeling suitably equipped to answer their children’s questions about birth family and history when these arose, with the ability to give their children first-hand information about their experiences.

Birth parents of children adopted from care are likely to have significant psychological and social needs pre-dating the adoption and will experience the adoption process as highly distressing and disempowering (Neil et al, 2010). In addition, the position of a parent in an EP placement can be very difficult and ambiguous, knowing that the people caring for their child hope to adopt them. They may experience feelings of vulnerability and consider their status as parents to be threatened (Chateauneuf, Pagé and Decaluwe, 2018). On the other hand, some parents can find it reassuring to know who will be caring for their child on a permanent basis and value the opportunity to get to know these people (Dibben &

Howorth, 2017). Parents may be confused about what Early Permanence means, and some may feel ‘fighting’ for their child is hopeless (Monck et al, 2005).

Contact (or ‘family time’) can provide important opportunities for carers and parents to get to know each other and build a relationship – opportunities that are typically missing in traditional adoptions. But the dynamics of contact are complicated as both parents and carers experience ‘disenfranchised parenting’; they each must navigate uncertain, partial roles, anticipating loss and lacking full parental recognition, yet both still identify as parents (Copson, 2024). This creates unique challenges in their ability to relate to each other and increases stresses around contact, but the chance for carers and parents to get to know each other can be one of the most valued and important aspects of the contact process in EP (Copson, 2024). Emotional support and relationship scaffolding from professionals in contact is vital, alongside clarity for all about the purpose of contact (Copson, 2024). Where good relationships have been established during contact in EP, this is a positive foundation for maintaining relationships as the child grows up, though these foundations are not always built on as direct contact is not always maintained (Copson, 2024).

1.4 Conclusions and key questions

It is now 12 years since the initial government drive to get more children placed earlier in their lives via Early Permanence schemes. In this time, legislation has been updated, practice guidance has been published, and knowledge and learning has evolved through experience. There is more widespread knowledge about what Early Permanence is overall, but there are still misconceptions and misunderstandings about what the scheme involves. Practice has clearly developed, indicated by the number of children being placed in EP placements increasing year on year, but there remains significant variation both nationally and locally and there are still areas of practice which require development to ensure consistency and standardisation.

The projects evaluated in this study were all funded by Adoption England with the aim of promoting the use and quality of Early Permanence as a route to adoption. The key aims of the evaluation were to:

- Capture what projects were doing and the resources required to achieve their aims.
- See how the activities were implemented.
- Understand how the innovations were experienced by those involved.
- Support sites to capture data about the operation of the innovations, their experiences and the impact.
- Include available and relevant data in evaluation reporting.

2 Evaluation Methodology

2.1 Summary of methods

The evaluation commenced in December 2024, with the following steps being undertaken for ongoing projects:

- Ethical approval was granted by Oxford Brookes University Ethics Committee in January 2024. An amendment to include interviews with EP carers was subsequently approved in September 2024.
- An initial online meeting was held with each project team between January and February 2024 to gather background information on the project.
- An online Theory of Change workshop was subsequently completed with each project team, as well as a plan of evaluation methods.
- Each site was supported to develop data capture and evaluation tools where these were not already in place.
- Any relevant existing data capture tools, where provided, were reviewed and advice was offered on updating/amending them if required.
- Each project was provided with a final Theory of Change, detailed evaluation framework and a one-page summary of the data required, with timescales for sending them to the evaluation team.
- EP statistics were requested to be sent by each agency on a quarterly basis (where relevant to the project).
- Quarterly ‘check in’ meetings were offered with each ongoing project site.
- Interviews with project teams, wider stakeholders and EP carers were undertaken between January and June 2025.
- Reminders to send all relevant data were sent to project sites via e-mail in April 2025.
- Analysis was undertaken of data provided.

For completed projects, the evaluation approach was intentionally light-touch. Where feasible, interviews were conducted with RAA representatives and/or project leads, or at minimum, an initial meeting was held. Some projects were able to share data, provided it was readily available and accessible. One of the key challenges in evaluating these projects was staff turnover, as many practitioners involved had since transitioned to other roles. Nonetheless, where data were available, it was thematically analysed and incorporated into the overall evaluation—particularly in cases where projects pursued distinctive aims or activities.

2.1.1 Theory of Change development with projects

To develop a Theory of Change for each project, workshops were held with project leads and any other key professionals from each site. One workshop was held in person while the rest were all online via Microsoft Teams. These workshops addressed the following questions:

- What is the rationale for change?
- What activities are being undertaken?
- What are the key mechanisms for change i.e. how will outcomes be achieved?
- What will look and feel different if these changes are implemented?
- What impact were/are the projects hoping to see?
- How will the resources lead to identified outcomes?
- What else might be shaping outcomes? For example, external factors.

A draft Theory of Change was shared with the project team who were then given the opportunity to offer feedback and suggest edits.

Within the Theory of Change workshops, a series of measurement tools were discussed and developed to be used by each site. The aim was that the tools would not only be useful for the evaluation, but for the agencies to carry out ongoing evaluation of their EP processes and activities in the longer term. The following information was confirmed with each site early in the evaluation:

- What data would be collected.
- How it would be collected.
- Who was collecting it.
- How often it would be collected and shared with the EP evaluation lead.

Each site was provided with a one-page summary of the above, and regular review meetings were offered to sites on a roughly quarterly basis. The evaluation lead was also available to offer advice and guidance at any point in between review meetings if required. Final documents were shared with each project for their reference and use.

2.1.2 Data collection

The table below outlines what types of data were requested and/or collected across projects.

Table 1: Data sources for the evaluation

Data type	Sources
EP statistics	<p>The following quarterly data were requested from some or all projects, depending on scope and aims and what project leads believed would be easy to request/extract.</p> <p>Children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of referrals made for EP. • Number of children placed EP. • Number of children placed for adoption. • Number of children adopted. <p>Adopters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of adopters approved. • Number of those offering EP. <p>Other project specific data included (but was not limited to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of adopters who went on to have a child placed via EP. • Number of children age 4+ placed EP. • Number of website views of practice guidance. • Number of referrals for therapeutic support services. • Number of EP carers who had accessed an EP buddy.
Feedback forms	<p>New and existing feedback forms were utilised to evaluate professional experience, understanding and confidence of EP overall and of specific activities provided by projects e.g. conferences and workshops. These were disseminated to adoption social workers and children’s social workers either following matching panel to reflect on a specific case or sent at a certain time point to provide a snapshot of EP knowledge and understanding, and feedback on project activities.</p> <p>EP carers’ experience of project activities were sought either through existing feedback forms, or newly developed ones (a template was shared with each project and amended as necessary). These were sent to EP carers who had been matched for adoption with a child (some were sent immediately after panel and some were retrospective, with carers who were matched in the previous 12 months).</p> <p>Project sites shared feedback forms from EP carers who had attended EP training where these were available. A feedback template</p>

Data type	Sources
	<p>developed by the evaluation team was shared where requested/required.</p> <p>Projects were also asked to send any feedback they had gathered across the course of the project in relation to specific activities.</p> <p>The content and quality of feedback forms varied (not all were co-developed with the evaluation lead, so advice was not able to be provided).</p>
Interviews with professionals	<p>Between December 2024 and June 2025, the lead researcher undertook qualitative, semi-structured interviews (individual and group) across the projects involving some or all of the following groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key project team members, including EP leads • Pan-regional RAA leads • EP champions • Adoption social workers • Wider stakeholders such as CAFCASS and external providers of project work <p>Fifty professionals were interviewed in total via Microsoft Teams. Interview schedules were shaped by each project’s Theory of Change, focusing on activity areas and intended outcomes.</p> <p>Interview questions invited respondents to reflect on the project overall, the value of it, and discuss specific activities in terms of helpfulness and impact. Questions were asked on experiences of collaboration, helpfulness of EP national standards, and what aspects of the project will continue into the future.</p>
Interviews with EP carers (certain projects where relevant)	<p>EP carers were recruited via feedback forms (described above) which asked them to indicate if they would be interested in being interviewed for the evaluation. Information sheets and data consent forms were provided.</p> <p>Three EP carers (one couple) were interviewed via Microsoft Teams.</p> <p>Three previous EP carers who trained as EP buddies, and one EP carer who received a buddy service were also interviewed.</p> <p>It was not possible to expand the pool of adopters to interview - the additional burden on agencies of inviting adopters into the research was the main barrier to recruitment.</p>
Project review reports	Where available, quarterly and final reports provided by project leads to Adoption England were read and reviewed by the evaluation lead.

2.2 Analysis

2.2.1 Quantitative data

We primarily worked with the data that sites were already collecting, with some requests for additional data where this was agreed to be relatively straightforward and useful to both the evaluation and the project itself. Towards the end of the evaluation period, it became clear that project leads were struggling to collect all data requested (discussed further in section 5). A descriptive analysis of the available quantitative data was carried out to develop an understanding of achievements.

Regarding EP statistics, it should be noted that where the number of EP placements made are reported, these figures are of the proportion of all children *placed* for adoption in the same timeframe.

2.2.2 Qualitative data

The following qualitative data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022), first identifying key themes for each project and then across all projects:

- Summaries of all final interviews
- Teams (AI) generated transcripts of all final interviews ¹
- Summaries of initial information gathering meetings with the project team
- Summaries of quarterly meetings with project leads
- Open box comments from feedback forms

Where they were available and provided, projects' interim and final reports for Adoption England helped to fill some gaps in factual information, as well as contribute towards a more in-depth understanding of the work of each project.

¹ Interviews were not transcribed by hand due to time limitations.

3 Summary of projects

Table 2 provides a summary of each project and funded period (though some projects extended beyond the end of this period due to unspent funding being rolled over into 2025/26). Seven projects commenced between nine and 21 months prior to the evaluation starting. Three projects had already ended at the start of the evaluation, and one was imminently due to end, so was included as a completed project. Each project has been assigned a number in the first column, which will be referenced in [Section 4 Findings across all projects](#).

All projects were set up slightly differently in terms of roles and responsibilities amongst the project team. Each project had at least one lead person whose existing role varied, for example team managers, RAA service managers, newly employed project specific managers/leads and a marketing lead. Project leads tended to be senior social work managers, though one project employed two unqualified EP support workers. All projects except one were led by an RAA; one project lead was based in a VAA.

A more detailed summary report of each project is provided in Appendix 1. These briefly outline what the projects' initial aims were, the main activities that were implemented, key findings in terms of whether the planned activities were able to be completed and the impact observed on EP practice.

Table 2: Overview of projects

Project	Lead RAA/VAA	Agencies/LAs involved	Summary	Funded period	Key learning from implementation
1	Adoption Partnership South East (APSE)	One RAA covering 3 LAs	Development of a wraparound therapeutic support service with a Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) approach, including an offer of independent birth parent support.	October 2022 to March 2025	Having an established EP scheme, with dedicated EP team, enabled this project to implement changes. Covering only one RAA meant that activities were able to be more easily implemented. A key success was the reduction in applications for post placement support from the ASGLB. All project activities will continue beyond the funded period, aside from the independent birth parent support service.
2	One Adoption² One Adoption South Yorkshire One Adoption West Yorkshire One Adoption North and Humber	Three RAAs covering 14 LAs	Development of a pan-regional approach to EP, including care planning, training, support and stakeholder voice and influence.	April 2022 to March 2025	The project was successfully implemented in the host RAA. The pan-regional element faced challenges, and activity levels were not equal across the region. The other two RAAs, who had some history of success in promoting EP, did not appear to sustain this progress in the face of management

² One Adoption had funding for two projects. This refers to the second project. See section 3.2 for details on the first project and why it was not included in the evaluation.

Project	Lead RAA/VAA	Agencies/LAs involved	Summary	Funded period	Key learning from implementation
					changes and challenges with adopter recruitment/sufficiency.
3	PACT/Adopt South	One VAA One RAA covering 4 LAs plus 1 VAA	Development of EP across the VAA and RAA in order to increase its' profile and value.	April 2023 to March 2025	Whilst this project experienced challenges, progress was made towards increasing the number of adopters open to EP, and the number of children placed with EP and new resources and services were developed. Feedback on the various activity areas was positive and practice improvements were reported.
4	Adopt East/Adoption Connects	Two RAAs covering 8 LAs plus 1 VAA	Development of EP across the region, plus a wraparound support service including therapeutic support for carers and social workers.	April 2022 to March 2025	The therapeutic support had relatively low demand, being mainly accessed by carers who were struggling. For the small numbers who used it, however, the service was highly valued suggesting this high tier support is useful as part of a range of support services.
5	Adopt London/Coram Adopt London North	4 RAAs covering 24 London boroughs plus 1 VAA	Development and improvement of EP across London.	April 2022 to March 2025 (extended until	Successes were identified in having an EP lead to drive the development of EP practice and facilitate and co-ordinate activities, particularly EP carer training, but sustainability was

Project	Lead RAA/VAA	Agencies/LAs involved	Summary	Funded period	Key learning from implementation
	Adopt London South Adopt London East Adopt London West			September 2025)	raised as a significant concern without ongoing funding.
6	Northeast/Cumbria Adopt Tees Valley Adoption Northeast Adopt Coast to Coast Caritas Care Adoption Matters ARC Adoption	3 RAAs covering 13 LAS plus 3 VAAs	Development of a pan-regional EP service.	April 2022 to March 2025	This was a successful collaboration between RAAs and VAAs. The project built on existing positive relationships between the involved agencies. Individual practitioners who continue to champion EP will need allocated time to commit to the project in the long term.
7	Northwest - Older children Adoption Now Adoption Counts Together for Adoption Adoption in Merseyside Adoption Matters	4 RAAs covering 15 LAS plus 2 VAAs	Development of practices around the use of EP for children aged 4+.	April 2022 to March 2025	While the initial aim of the project was not achieved (to increase the number of older children placed with EP carers), the project was reported to see other successes such as the development of therapeutic training for prospective adopters. The project also raised the profile of EP for older children, created a legacy of resources on EP and saw an increase in networking across the region.

Project	Lead RAA/VAA	Agencies/LAs involved	Summary	Funded period	Key learning from implementation
	Caritas Care				
8	Northwest – Family Time	4 RAAs covering 15 LAs plus 2 VAAs	Production of good practice guidance and training for managing family time in EP.	April 2023 to March 2024 Evaluated as a ‘completed’ project	The project faced challenges in delivering its original aims. The project highlighted the impact that training can have on the visibility of an area of practice, however it also showed that training needs to be pitched to the right audience who have the means to make changes. The development of practice guidance and related training materials may be better placed at the national rather than local level.
9	South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) Adoption West Adopt South West Aspire Barnardo’s CCS Adoption PACT	3 RAAs covering 14 LAs plus 3 VAAs	To refresh and strengthen EP across the region.	September 2022 to August 2023	This project achieved some of its goals particularly in terms of more children being placed in EP. The project had broad aims, across a large geographical area, which may have affected the extent of change that could be achieved.

Project	Lead RAA/VAA	Agencies/LAs involved	Summary	Funded period	Key learning from implementation
10	<p>Midlands Together Collaboration (MTC)</p> <p>Adoption @ Heart Adoption Central England Adoption Birmingham Barnardo's Adoption Focus</p>	3 RAAs covering 10 LAs plus 2 VAAs	<p>Development and improvement of EP across the region.</p> <p>(A cost-benefit analysis of EP vs. traditional adoption was also part of the project but this was not included in the evaluation as was research rather than practice development)</p>	April 2022 to September 2023	Data collected on this project was limited. Several positive outcomes and the need to sustain these were highlighted by the manager interviewed for the evaluation.
11	<p>Adopt Thames Valley (ATV)</p>	RAA covering 7 LAs	Development of an existing buddy scheme to offer support to EP carers.	April 2022 to March 2023	This project had a specific focus which built on an existing successful initiative. Findings indicate that the buddy scheme was extremely valuable not only to those who received it, but also to the EP buddies who benefited from training and support themselves. It worked well for recipients who prefer a 1:1 relationship over group support and having access to unlimited sessions allowed for a relationship to develop and grow.

4 Findings across all projects

4.1 Overarching Theory of Change

The overarching Theory of Change (Table 3) was developed from individual project Theory of Change documents. This outlines simply what the identified barriers in EP were, what solutions were implemented to address these and what the desired outcomes were of this implementation.

Table 3: Overarching Theory of change

Barriers	Solutions	Desired Outcomes
Regional variations in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of an EP lead/worker Identification of EP champions in agencies and LAs Regular working groups and development days to discuss practice improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective oversight, management and co-ordination of EP practice development will drive meaningful change. Improved communication, networking and collaboration will lead to more cohesive EP services across wider areas.
Limited data on EP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of new data tracking systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved overview on how EP is being used in different RAAs/LAs in order to target areas for development and improvement.
Professionals lack knowledge and confidence, impacted by staff turnover, leading to children not being considered for EP and a limited pool of EP carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of training and resources for children's and adoption social workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With increased knowledge, understanding and confidence, social workers will consider more children of all ages (including siblings) for EP, and prospective adopters are encouraged to consider it.
Challenges with legal representatives and the judiciary who would not support EP placements and lacked understanding of the legal framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training and engagement events with legal representatives and the judiciary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With increased knowledge, understanding and confidence of EP, legal stakeholders will support more children being placed with EP carers

Barriers	Solutions	Desired Outcomes
surrounded placement choices		
Additional emotional strains for carers	Therapeutic and peer support for carers	EP carers are more able to deal with uncertainty and challenges through the provision of robust support
Variations in preparation and training for prospective EP carers	Revision and development of training for prospective EP carers	Prospective EP carers will receive consistent, thorough training which will enable them to make an informed decision as to whether EP is right for them, and if so, will prepare them for the EP role.
Fostering regulations not being consistently implemented	Development of training and resources for professionals, utilising knowledge from fostering teams	EP placements will be appropriately regulated and supported, and EP carers will be clear on their roles and responsibilities as foster carers.
Lack of independent support for birth parents Birth parents' voices are not reflected in literature and resources	Enhanced support and visibility for birth parents, with increased engagement in agency activities such as training and resource	When birth parents are offered meaningful support, they will feel better able to engage in the EP process. Birth families/ increased participation in training and resource development will lead to more inclusive, empathetic and effective services.
Relationships between parents and EP carers not always encouraged	Training for carers and professionals on the benefits of supporting relationships. Support work with birth parents to ensure their understanding of the EP	By better understanding the benefits and opportunities of developing positive relationships during the EP period, the foundations of these relationships will be

Barriers	Solutions	Desired Outcomes
	process and the benefits of maintain relationships.	built upon in the future if the child is adopted, leading to better quality staying in touch arrangements.

Across the projects significant learning was generated about the value of the specified approaches in addressing the barriers, the exception being learning about supporting birth parents, and only limited learning about family time. The key activity areas will be discussed further in [Section 4.3](#), after a discussion of overall learning about early permanence numbers during the timescale of the evaluation.

4.2 Descriptive analysis of statistical data

As noted in [Section 2](#), the availability and accuracy of data led to challenges with statistical analysis. Data provided by some agencies was difficult to interpret or pull together. Due to the above challenges, published data (by Coram-i) has been utilised to consider the overall numbers of EP placements since 2021. It is worth noting that several projects reported that they had concerns about the accuracy of published data when compared to their own data, mostly in the direction of EP placements being underreported in the national data. The national data, does, however, provide some contextual information.

Table 4 draws on published ASGLB data for all of England - the total number of children reported to have been placed with EP carers in each year, as a proportion of the number placed for adoption in the same year (Coram-i, 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025).

Table 4: National EP figures across the evaluation period

	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25
Number of children placed with EP carers	500	570	550	530
Number of children placed for adoption	2,850	2,860	2,940	2,740
% of children placed with EP carers as a proportion of children placed for adoption	17.5%	19.9%	18.7%	19.3%

The table highlights that an increase of 2.4 percentage points in EP placements was seen after the start of most of the EP projects. The numbers are fairly static across the following three years up to the end of March 2025.

When looking at the number of children waiting with a placement order, in 2024/2025 this peaked at its highest level (2910 children) since 2020/2021. Across the same time period, adopter approvals dropped by 29% from 3,130 to 2,230. The gap between children waiting and adopters approved has been steadily increasing since 2023.

Where projects were able to provide a full, or near full, data set, these indicated that for many, overall, there appeared to be an increase in EP activity both in terms of the number of adopters open to EP and the number of children placed with EP carers. This was not necessarily, however, a year-on-year increase and ebbed and flowed across the three-year period between 2022 and 2025. Variations between agencies (including those working on the same project) was common.

Combining available project data and national data, it appears that projects have at least held up, and in some areas increased, the numbers of children being placed for EP against a backdrop of decreasing numbers of adopters.

4.3 Activities across all projects

Seven key activity areas were identified across the projects, as outlined in Table 5, with examples. The table also identifies which projects undertook activities in each area.

Table 5: Mapping of key activity areas across the projects

Activity area	Example activities/resources	Projects that had activities in this area
Implementation of EP lead and/or champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment of EP support worker • Employment of EP lead/manager • Identification of EP champions in each local authority • Regular meetings with champions • Practice development with champions 	2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Development of resources, training and/or guidance for social workers and wider stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best practice guidance • Leaflets and resource packs for professionals • Guidance around implementation of fostering regulations • EP conferences • Development days and working groups 	All

Activity area	Example activities/resources	Projects that had activities in this area
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EP advice ‘surgeries’ • Training events/workshops/webinars for social workers • Dissemination of a monthly EP newsletter. 	
Changes/additions to recruitment, training, preparation and available resources for prospective EP carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing campaigns to recruit more adopters (and therefore EP carers). • Development of information packs to support training • Review of existing EP carer training. • Development of new, standalone training (half/full day/two day). • Development of a webinar to be used in training • Development of an animation for prospective carers 	2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10
Increased/targeted support for EP carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer support groups for EP carers, facilitated by an EP practitioner • Buddy schemes, linking new EP carers up with experienced carers • Independent therapeutic support/counselling. • DDP training for adoption social workers. 	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11
Enhanced support and visibility for birth parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted/additional support for birth parents via an independent provider. • Work to ensure birth parents’ voices influence and are reflected in documents and training materials. • Animation explaining EP. 	1, 2, 3
Implementation of new	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of data spreadsheets for LAs to complete on a quarterly basis. 	2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10

Activity area	Example activities/resources	Projects that had activities in this area
data/tracking/audit systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit tools to assess the use of EP across LAs/RAAs. • Organised systems for identifying EP matches such as linking spreadsheets and exploration of the use of LinkMaker. 	

The overall findings about each activity area are discussed below.

4.3.1 Implementation of EP lead and/or champions

Where projects' remit was the overall development of EP practice, all implemented an EP lead or support worker and several identified EP champions in local authorities. EP leads were described as undertaking several tasks, such as:

- Delivery of training to professionals and EP carers,
- Working with others to develop EP training
- Co-ordination of peer support groups for EP carers.
- Engagement with wider stakeholders such as CAFCASS and the judiciary.
- Undertaking direct work with EP carers.
- Offering advice and guidance to social workers.
- Developing new data tracking systems.
- Facilitating EP champions' working groups.
- Developing and disseminating resources such as newsletters and practice guidance.

EP project leads were predominantly social work qualified with management experience. One project employed two support workers who undertook a similar role to the EP lead. Of the projects who had an EP lead which undertook the role described above, three had a full-time lead (or a specific EP support worker). For three other projects, the role was part time, alongside a part time team manager or social work role within an RAA. One project's lead worked on an ad hoc consultancy basis.

What worked well

- Project leads and champions reported that having an EP lead **kept the momentum of EP going** and drove practice forward, with increased awareness of EP across RAAs and LAs.
- Champions appreciated having a **point of contact for advice and guidance**
- Having someone with **oversight and management of activities** was reported by project teams and champions to be valuable, as RAA leads and team managers noted they would not have had the time to take on this role themselves.
- EP leads brought **expertise and knowledge** which aided practice development.

EP champions were practitioners in RAAs or local authority adoption and/or children's teams who took on an extra piece of work as part of their current role. The actual activities of champions varied but responsibilities included being a key point of contact on EP and attending champions workshops and meetings. Regarding the implementation of champions, it was reported that:

- The impact these roles had was variable across projects. This was dependent on the how pro-active and committed champions were and their availability to undertake the role. Many were hindered by lack of allocated time for the role.
- Champions' meetings were predominantly helpful in sharing practice and learning from others, particularly where one agency may not have experience in a certain area e.g. reunification.
- Champions appreciated the support of colleagues, and having a safe space in which to talk about challenging cases or ask for advice/guidance. Some said that unexpected friendships had formed with pan-regional colleagues through new opportunities to work together.
- Where close working groups were formed and met regularly, there was an increase in collaborative working between agencies (both RAAs and VAAs).

Challenges

- Once project funding ended, no RAAs were able to continue to fund a lead EP worker whose sole focus was the development of EP. One area, Adopt East, was able to continue to employ the project lead under a wider remit of Adopter Lead, which includes EP under that umbrella. Other project leads returned to their previous roles and hours and their activities were subsumed by existing staff. Where projects had experience of previously having an EP lead for a short funded period, it was reported that it was **difficult to sustain change without a continued focus from a specific individual.**

[With] a fixed term project, you're always going to have a challenge around staffing because...as you're nearing the end of a project, people aren't necessarily going to wait until the very end to look for other job opportunities (RAA Leader)

- Some projects experienced **changes within the project team.** This did not necessarily impact on the project negatively, as different individuals bring different knowledge and experience. For some, it led to a shift in focus. For one project where both project workers left each agency within a few months of each other, this was more difficult, particularly when it came to light that one worker had not undertaken some of the work that had been expected of them, and had not given permission to use the resources they produced.
- Feedback from those who had 'split' roles identified it was challenging to undertake the project work **alongside the 'day job' which had to take priority.** The EP leads reported that at times, it felt as though neither job was being done well. Where project

workers were employed solely to focus on EP, this allowed them dedicated time for EP which was reported to work well and be valued by EP carers and social workers.

It's like everything, if it's part and parcel of your day job, or even if it's your day job with some protected time, the protection of that time in our work is not protected. So I think it gave it that focus that it needed and it gave somebody [the opportunity] to really live and breathe it. (RAA Lead)

Learning and impact

EP leads do seem to have a positive impact effect on driving and sustaining practice development across the range of other activity areas, particularly in their 'home' RAA. Their value is limited when their role is constrained by other demands or is time limited. Most projects did not feel confident about sustaining the momentum of changes without the dedicated funding for this leadership.

Regarding EP champions, their impact depended on how much time they were able to commit to the role, and how pro-active they were in being involved in practice development meetings.

4.3.2 Development of resources, training and/or guidance for social workers and wider stakeholders

Several projects implemented activities which aimed to upskill practitioners on their knowledge of EP and their confidence in applying this in practice, for example in care planning for children or assessing adopters. Activities included: the development of written resources or newsletters; delivery of training events (e.g. development days, practice forums, conferences) aimed at children's social workers, adoption social workers, family time workers and legal representatives including CAFCASS; offering advice and guidance through 'surgeries'. Under this activity area, support to social workers was also considered, which included activities such as the offer of clinical support to adoption social workers via therapeutic consultation sessions.

What worked well

- Increasing practitioners' knowledge of EP was perceived to lead to greater confidence in social workers considering EP as a plan for the child. For example, one project developed a short one-hour online webinar for Newly Qualified Social Workers. Feedback from attendees indicated that even this very short introduction to EP increased social workers' understanding of it and their confidence in recommending it as a possible placement for some children.

[The conference helped most with] thinking more about integrating conversations about EP into my assessments earlier - with more families than I would have earlier. I recognise I am more cautious and need to be more open (Adoption SW)

- Training was seen to lead to development of new skills for practice.

I think one of the real advantages actually of this funding has been to just develop social work skills and then for them to be able to use those with families directly, because with EP there are so many [other] people involved. (Project lead)

- EP carers expressed appreciation for social workers who had a thorough understanding of EP.

[Our adoption social worker] was awesome... she had lots of information. She was really well-versed in [EP] and we knew she had worked with other adopters who had gone through the Early Permanence process so we felt very prepared with the knowledge she shared with us. (EP Carer)

[Our social worker] really fought our corner... [she is] really fantastic. She really cares about us and making sure we're ok. (EP Carers)

- Projects felt that staff development activities levelled things up with training, fostering, expectations, paperwork etc across partner agencies.

Case example: Northwest Older Children

The project lead developed several user-friendly resources aimed at professionals, including visual tools for assessing social workers and a handbook for new EP carers. Feedback on resources that were shared at an EP conference workshop highlighted that attendees found these 'brilliant' and 'very useful', with the applicability to practice being identified as particularly positive. Further informal feedback sent to the project lead noted a social work toolkit for moving older children to an EP placement that it was a 'fantastic resource'. A team member from another project highlighted that the resources produced in this project, which had been shared in Adoption England practice workshops, were helpful tools which addressed certain barriers in placing older children.

The lead also wrote and disseminated a monthly EP newsletter (of which there were 10 across the course of the evaluation) which has continued after the end of the

project, primarily to EP champions but anyone could sign up if they would find it useful. Information in the newsletter included details on a peer support group, EP carer training, any conferences or development events, new EP resources and Adoption England news. The newsletter is an example of the project's successful networking and information sharing.

- Those who used therapeutic consultations found them helpful. For example, one social worker mentioned how useful it was to have space to think and reflect.

...I found [an entire EP caseload] quite overwhelming in terms of how much support all of the Early Permanence carers needed throughout the court proceedings... so I think for me as a practitioner, the support was very helpful... I think that [the DDP therapist] really supported me in slowing down a little bit, thinking about what I was doing. Not rushing to try and fix problems which I think has always been my go to is, you know, how can I fix this and just kind of slow right down and actually just sit with people in their nests and just allow that emotion, and then afterwards it just gave me an opportunity to debrief and let some of that go. (Adoption (EP) Social Work

Challenges

- Across the projects there was duplication of effort in terms of the production of resources.
- A concern raised by one project lead was that the resources online were being endorsed by Adoption England, but were not subject to robust quality control – the quality was variable.
- Despite a significant amount of focused work on increasing knowledge of EP for children's social workers, it was reported by adoption social workers and EP carers in interviews and feedback forms that there were still gaps in knowledge and children's social workers who did not understand what EP was.

[The child's social worker] wasn't aware of Early Permanence and it's still the first time she's dealing with it... we felt like they didn't quite understand it from our perspective that we're not just foster carers...we didn't come into it to be professionals...we're doing it in order to adopt... I think if she'd have had a bit more understanding of Early Permanence from the beginning it would have been better... (EP carers)

- Reunification with birth families is a possible outcome of EP, and carers 'take the risk' on the child's behalf. Where reunification did occur, this could lead to reductions of confidence of social workers about this placement option. This suggests more training and support around reunification is needed.

- Projects reported that staff turnover (in children’s teams and adoption teams) created challenges in sustaining the implementation of new knowledge and understanding of EP. Some were addressing this by offering, or looking to offer, rolling training and engagement sessions for social workers.
- The offer of therapeutic support for social workers had very low uptake.

Learning and impact

Training for social workers appeared beneficial but regular, rolling training is needed to keep the changing workforce knowledgeable about EP. Resources were produced by nearly all the projects, and some of these were either very similar or overlapped significantly, which suggested a more strategic national approach could be valuable. The value of therapeutic support for SWs is unproven and there did not appear to be a demand for this. However, practitioners valued case consultations and feedback suggested these had a supportive element. Others felt supported by being part of an EP working group.

4.3.3 Changes/additions to recruitment, training, preparation and available resources for prospective EP carers

Marketing campaigns

Two projects used some of the project funding to undertake marketing campaigns which included working with a marketing professional. One project developed a recruitment animation to explain the benefits of EP to prospective adopters, alongside a media campaign.

Project teams reported the following benefits:

- An increase from one area in the number of prospective adopters offering EP.
- An increase in adoption enquiries.
- Having local voices talk about EP.

Opportunities were provided for collaboration with marketing professionals with various skills which led to new learning and development.

Project example: Northwest (Older Children)

Two marketing campaigns were undertaken (March 2024 and March 2025). The first, 'Growing Families Together' promoted adoption for older children. Three 'Adopter Stories' videos were created which went live on YouTube, Adoption Northwest Website and Facebook with the following viewing figures:

- YouTube views – 41,431
- Social Media Impressions – 858,145
- Website views – 25,600

The project team reported benefits in marketing leads across agencies collaborating to reach a bigger audience. There were unfortunately no figures provided on how the campaign affected adopter enquiries or applications, but the viewing figures indicate a wide audience was reached.

EP Carer Training

Several projects enhanced the training offered to EP carers by reviewing and updating the existing offer, with some projects standardising training pan-regionally. Projects gave examples of **increased collaboration** whereby training was shared i.e. agency's prospective EP carers could attend another agency's training if required.

Feedback from project leads and champions suggested that:

- Enhanced training was helpful in ensuring that all EP carers received clear, similar messages about the expectations of an EP carer and the potential challenges involved. Feedback from carers suggested more in-depth input (and take-home materials) on EP encouraged consideration of choosing this option.
- Practitioners (EP champions) reported increased confidence that when they placed a child with carers from a different agency (but within the project area), they had received robust training and had the same expectations as their own carers.
- Where the time allocated for training had increased significantly, EP champions were particularly positive about the impact it had on carers' preparation – one example was one LA increasing their training on EP for prospective adopters from three hours to two full days.

We know that...we can all send our adopters to whatever training and we know it's all going to be delivering the same messages. [The EP lead] sets the tone... really empathetically about birth parents and I think that is something that she really makes clear from the outset. (EP champion)

- Some projects were not able to standardise EP carer training across their area. Some projects reported that the RAA were happy with their existing training. Interestingly, while most projects who were reviewing their training were moving to standalone EP training, one project who previously offered standalone training brought it back into standard preparation training.
- Feedback from prospective EP carers on newly implemented training was very positive overall, though available feedback was limited due to training not having been implemented for long. EP carers particularly valued having a confident presenter and hearing from experienced EP carers. Carers reported in interviews that training can only prepare you so far for the reality of EP.

The training and the information that was shared [on EP by the agency] just confirmed our thoughts that...we had the I suppose strength to take on that risk on behalf of the child because, you know, the purpose of Early Permanence is us taking on that risk and it's a win-win for them either way...we knew that if the child went back to birth family...then we'd have given them the most secure, stable, start in life. (EP Carer)

Development of resources for EP carers

Similar benefits were identified to the development of resources for professionals. Project teams suggested that resources such as written information packs, leaflets and videos/webinars were useful in enhancing the overall preparation of EP carers and helping people consider EP.

Learning and impact

Comprehensive and revised training and preparation for EP carers was perceived as beneficial, and benefits could be maximised by sharing of resources across agencies. The co-ordination and delivery of training was a task which required ongoing oversight, however, with concerns this would be difficult without an EP lead in place.

4.3.4 Increased/targeted support for EP carers

There was widespread acknowledgement that **EP is a complex placement option, particularly for EP carers, with a significant level of emotional stress**. It was noted by several project teams that EP had become more complex in recent years, with care proceedings becoming more protracted, and carers were having to manage uncertainty for much longer. The significance of early attachment relationships was also highlighted, and the potential impact of uncertainty on these – **where carers were under stress and struggling to cope, social workers felt this could impact on parenting, and subsequently impact on the child's development in the short and long term**.

Support was offered in a variety of ways across the projects, which included:

- Peer support through regular support groups online or in person.
- Peer support through a buddy system.
- Therapeutic support, delivered by an external agency.
- Mobilising informal support from friends and family
- Support from therapeutically trained social workers (some specifically trained in DDP as part of the project).
- Strengthening support when reunification happened.

Peer support

Across all projects offering peer support either in the form of a buddy system or a support group for EP carers facilitated by a social/support worker it was reported that:

- Peer support groups provided a safe space for carers to share their worries and anxieties.
- Having support groups online made it possible for as many people to attend as possible, and enabled people to connect with others pan-regionally (which was previously not possible).

Two projects were offering a buddy or mentoring scheme via an external provider. Both reported similar numbers accessing support (6-7 families), but the size and geography of the two areas was significantly different. The smaller project was pleased with the take up whereas the larger project was disappointed. EP carers were reported to be motivated to offer others support that either they benefited from themselves or felt was missing from their own experience. Where EP carers were offered initial training and ongoing support with undertaking the buddy role, this was highly valued, particularly with discussions that were particularly difficult. Initial indications suggest this type of scheme is something that could be rolled out more widely to offer additional support to EP carers who may be struggling with the process, but a further scoping exercise would clarify the need and desire for this nationally.

Without the structure, training and support as a buddy, I don't know whether it would be as valuable to recipients. (EP buddy)

Therapeutic support

Two projects utilised funding to offer extended, more targeted therapeutic support to EP carers who were experiencing difficulties. This was provided in one of two ways:

1. Access to therapeutic counselling sessions through an independent organisation.
2. Upskilling adoption social workers by training them in at least level 1 DDP.

Therapeutic counselling sessions

An interview with one social worker who referred carers identified that the **referral process was straightforward and without bureaucracy** (which was much appreciated). Both the social worker and two sets of carers who had accessing counselling sessions reported that the sessions were extremely beneficial and led to an improvement in relationships was observed between the carers and the child and ultimately the **counselling prevented a placement breakdown**.

[The counselling] has been phenomenal for us. We have had an extremely protracted, stressful and emotionally exhausting journey through our Fostering for Adoption process... this service was offered to us at a time when we were almost at breaking point... [Our counsellor] is awesome... His focus and advice, no matter what the issue was, was always about what he felt was best for us and our family... We poured our heads and hearts out to him through some very difficult times and he gave us so much support and guidance... Please make this a permanent service, beyond the pilot, and make adoption professionals, prospective adopters and other stakeholders fully aware of it. (EP Carers)

Therapeutic support to families has been really helpful; a complicated situation and the therapeutic input helped to secure the placement. Without it, it would have been more difficult to sustain the placement... Adopters just knowing they can access therapeutic support even if they don't use it is important. (Adoption Social Worker)

Support delivered by therapeutically trained social workers

One project focused on offering enhanced, wraparound therapeutic support for EP carers through their adoption social workers undertaking DDP training, as well as utilising independent therapeutic support where necessary. From a handful of feedback forms received, EP carers who reported that their **adoption social worker provided valuable support**, which was also corroborated by an interview with a set of EP carers.

[Our adoption social worker] has been really caring but in quite a practical way, like helping us rationalise some of the emotions you have. (EP carers)

A further measurement of success was a **drop in how many applications were made to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund** within six months of being placed for adoption following EP (from 30% in 22/23, to 15% in 23/24 to zero in 24/25).

One adoption social worker interviewed reported that the DDP training **gave her tools to enable her to work with families who were experiencing difficulties** during the EP process.

[The DDP training] just gives you some real, practical ways of managing in difficult sessions when you're with families that are finding it quite difficult...just some ways of slowing it down, not rushing to...make that support straight away and just kind of help hold them, even some of like the non-verbal cues, just like a reminder of all of those things I think was helpful. (Adoption Social Worker)

Feedback from EP carers across all projects identified that **support from adoption social workers and teams was rated highly**, which indicates that there is likely a good understanding of EP and the needs of EP carers in this workforce. Project teams did, however, identify that EP carers were less satisfied with support offered by children's social workers, which could be variable in quality and helpfulness.

There were specific scenarios where adoption social workers believed additional, more specialised support was required – where reunification was being considered or had been agreed upon, where care proceedings were protracted and/or where there was a high level of uncertainty. Both adoption and children's social workers highlighted in feedback forms their concerns around the emotional toll that EP can have on carers.

Learning and impact

Overall, this appears to be a very promising activity area which could positively impact the overall support offer to carers and the child's experience, and it would go some way to address some of the concerns that professionals raised about the emotional impact of EP on carers. Furthermore, the offer of support could also incentivise people to consider EP where they may not otherwise have done. Feedback suggests that for all EP carers the support they receive from their social worker and the child's social worker should be sensitive to the emotional complexities of early permanence as well as knowledgeable about the fostering regulations and differences between the EP carer's role and regular foster care. Where people need or want more support, mobilizing friends and family support or connecting people with other EP experienced adopters through groups or buddy schemes can be helpful. Higher level support (i.e. therapy) can be helpful for a minority of carers in more tricky situations, particularly where there are high levels of uncertainty.

4.3.5 Enhanced support and visibility for birth parents

Three projects specifically considered birth parents within their project aims and objectives across two activity areas:

- Targeted/additional support for parents.
- Ensuring birth parents' voices were reflected in resources, documents and training materials.

An additional focus for some projects was on supporting positive relationships between parents and carers, particularly around family time/contact. The support offered in this area, however, tended to be focused more on carers than parents e.g. in preparation training. Where there was an aim to work with birth parents directly, this was not well achieved by any project. It should be noted that no feedback was gathered from birth parents.

The following challenges were identified:

- **Difficulties with engaging parents** to gather their views and contribute to resources and training materials, so there is limited evidence of birth parents' voice across the projects. One project was not able to achieve this at all. Another was able to recruit a birth parent to take part in a training video, but the parent had not had a child placed with EP carers as was originally planned.
- **Take up of targeted support was reported to be much lower than expected** in the one project that offered it via an independent organisation. It was felt by project leads that the support was potentially offered at the wrong time, by the wrong person and/or in the wrong medium (virtually as opposed to face to face).

There's often a view expressed that birth parents really value having somebody independent that they can talk to who's outside of the local authority, but actually what that showed us that at the EP point in time, birth parents are just so overwhelmed and when they receive information or a contact from an independent they're like 'who are you?' (EP Lead)

Other projects who did not initially implement any specific activity focused on birth parents identified that this was something that required more thought and understanding. This remains an area which requires further consideration.

Learning and impact

Impact in this area was limited and hence new learning about how to better engage parents in EP and family time was not really generated. The findings underscore the importance of identifying strategies to overcome barriers to engaging birth parents and ensuring they receive appropriate support throughout the EP period. Additionally, there is

a need to recognise and encompass the valuable role birth parents can play in shaping and contributing to EP practice and its ongoing development.

4.3.6 Implementation of new data/tracking systems

Recording and collating EP data

Some projects attempted to address the issue of a lack of availability of accurate data on EP by implementing new data collection measures and tracking tools. One example was a simple spreadsheet that was sent to all local authorities and VAAs across the project area to complete on a quarterly basis. This activity was not related directly to increasing EP, but to more accurately measuring the use of EP across an area.

Where this was successful, the **benefits** reported by project teams included:

- **Keeping up momentum by identifying improvements** year on year.
- An overview of EP data could be encouraging but also **identify where things may need to be done differently**.
- Help with identifying **where additional recruitment of EP carers** was required.
- Being able to track children in ‘real time’, to **maintain a sense of which children EP is being used for**.

Several **challenges** were evident:

- **Difficulty and/or delays in getting accurate data off each local authority** and/or RAA. There was an example of one RAA who reported that they could not provide data as they did not have a spreadsheet of children placed EP, and a lot of the information was only known to the manager.
- Some **reluctance to gather more data in addition to all other data requests** was reported.
- **Lack of confidence with IT**, including databases and data extraction tools, could impact on agencies’ ability to provide data. Some RAAs had data analysts, or at least someone confident in recording and extracting data, so were able to extract data more easily.
- Existing databases and recording systems did not always lend themselves to easily extrapolating useful EP data.
- More than one project raised **concerns that data provided to the ASG, and reported by Coram-i were not accurate**.

Case example: One Adoption

The head of the RAA that took the lead on this project introduced a new database system (Power BI Matrix), where EP data could be pulled through from the recording database. Data could be filtered and broken down as required. The responsibility of this database lay with the RAA lead (part of the EP project team) who reported that it had enabled the agency to have a good overview of what EP looks like in the area, including information on number of EP placements, number of EP carers, number of carers who have been on EP training and the number of change of plans. This was only being used in that one RAA, not pan-regionally.

Linking tools

Some projects aimed to develop a referral database to support linking and matching of EP across the area or looked at utilising Link Maker in this regard. These **all encountered some difficulties due to the fast pace of identifying and making EP placements and the reliance on several people to provide updates.**

A benefit identified by one project was that there was **an increase in closer working relationships and familiarity with others in different agencies led to an increase in links** being made, albeit not necessarily in a formalised way but via e-mails and phone calls to check on carer availability. Another found that having a champion who was the point of contact for all families in stage one of the adoption process was able to identify potential EP carers early on which led to more strategic linking and matching.

A further strand to this activity area was the development of audit tools for assessing the use of EP across project areas. There was no specific feedback available on the helpfulness of these, but project leads reported a need to better understand the use of EP in order to make improvements to practice.

Learning and impact

In areas where improvements were made in data tracking, there was a positive impact on those areas having a better overview of how EP was being used across their area, which could support practice development. Many projects faced significant challenges, however, in collecting accurate EP data and therefore impact was more limited. This remains an area which requires further focus and improvement, and is discussed in section 5.3.

4.4 Key successes identified by projects

The overall key successes identified across most projects included:

- A **dedicated focus on EP kept EP ‘on the table’ with ongoing momentum**, which had an overall positive impact on EP practice.
- Practice development being **driven by experienced and knowledgeable EP leads**.
- Many projects reported an **increase in children placed in EP**. But stable numbers of EP placements and declining numbers were also observed in specific RAAs.
- An **increase in the number of adopters willing to consider EP** in many areas.
- **EP carers were better prepared for the EP role** by having access to improved and more robust preparation training in many regions.
- The **additional support needs of EP carers were acknowledged and met** through a variety of support services.
- **Opportunities for sharing learning and good practice** through networking and collaboration.
- **Closer working relationships** which led to increased matching in some areas.

4.5 Overarching challenges and barriers encountered and identified by projects

Making change across a large area

Several projects spanned a large geographical area which involved numerous RAAs, VAAs and local authorities. The set up of the RAA appeared to contribute to how successful projects were, as did how stable senior leadership teams were. Where projects already had established existing relationships (e.g. Northeast and Cumbria), this provided a foundation for working together.

Benefits to pan-regional working included:

- Learning from others, particularly in areas of practice which hadn't been experienced by some agencies such as reunification.
- Sharing of resources e.g. training, peer support groups and opening these up to carers across a larger area led to increased participation and decreased individual agency workloads.
- Structures that led to an increase in EP placements being made such as protocol allowing for inter-agency placements across several RAAs and VAAs in one area.

One key challenge identified was the uneven involvement and engagement across RAAs when a single RAA led a project. The level of commitment from senior management was reported to significantly influence the extent to which meaningful change could be achieved. In some cases, this imbalance resulted in unequal distribution of responsibilities and fragmented activity.

Targeting development at the appropriate level of seniority was identified as a critical factor by several projects. In one case, practitioner training was delivered to frontline staff, but the project team felt that greater impact could have been achieved by engaging senior management to drive practice change from the top down.

Adopter sufficiency

Nearly all projects reported challenges with recruiting EP carers, which was linked to a wider national issue of adopter sufficiency. For some, this was identified as significantly impacting EP carer numbers, availability and subsequently, the number of EP placements made. Project leads reported that EP carers were being used for young children with Placement Orders, with demand for EP placements often not able to be met. This could have a knock-on effect in terms of referrals for EP - where Children's Social Workers were requesting an EP placement but were repeatedly told that none were available, it was feared they would be reluctant to continue to make these requests or consider EP in the future.

Duplication of resources and challenges with accessing them

Several projects appeared to be creating similar resources, such as leaflets on specific topics for EP carers and professionals, as well as training for social workers.

...on the website, some of those [resources] are duplicate pieces of work to different degrees... they're presented differently and got a couple of different ideas...[ours] would have just been another iteration of what existed... (RAA Lead)

Some professionals noted that the Adoption England website was difficult to navigate, and they struggled to locate some of the resources that had been uploaded. It was found that the webpage hosting one resource (Practice guidance on family time in EP) had only been viewed 227 times over a 10 month period. This is a resource that would have far reaching applicability across local authorities, but is clearly not being utilised, potentially due to it being difficult to find, and/or agencies not being aware of its' existence.

The duplication of resources, coupled with reported challenges in locating materials online, highlights the need for a more strategic, nationally coordinated approach to resource development and dissemination. Section 5.2 explores opportunities to streamline efforts at a national level by utilising existing resources produced by individual project sites.

Changes to the scope of the project

Many projects found that, given the length of time the projects spanned, their initial aims and envisaged activities changed and evolved across the course of the project. Reasons for this identified by project teams and heads of service included:

- A quick bidding process with limited advice and guidance available (one RAA lead compared this to the multi-disciplinary support funding where they felt more time and comprehensive guidance was provided).
- Staff changes, with different project leads/workers bringing different experience and interest which changed the direction of activity.
- Challenges with collaboration between agencies within the project area e.g. data sharing between an RAA and VAA, limited engagement from some RAAs with the host agency seeing most impact/change.
- Changes to the adoption landscape, including difficulties with adopter recruitment and sufficiency.
- Identified needs and gaps in the service changing across the period of the project.

4.6 Application and implementation of EP National Standards

The use of the EP national standards varied across projects. Some did not use them specifically due to challenges in implementation beyond the RAA remit. Where they were applied, the standards helped develop audit tools to assess EP usage regionally, were shared with stakeholders to strengthen messages about EP and when/how it should be used, and served to confirm compliance with required practices.

The case example below outlines how one project used the standards to develop an EP audit tool to gain a better picture of how EP was being used in each region, and what improvements were required.

Case example: Adoption South West

One project which ended in March 2023 has since undertaken a ‘thematic EP audit’ across the whole RAA which has analysed practice against the EP standards. This involved using a detailed template based on the national standards being used as ‘a tool to enable local authorities, regional adoption agencies and voluntary adoption agencies to progress and secure consistency and coherence in the Early Permanence offer to children’. The RAA asked each LA to use their own child level data to answer questions and consider the EP standards in relation to their practice. Once all the information was received, the findings were reviewed as part of a peer panel (consisting of senior RAA managers) where key themes were identified. Themes and relevant actions were fed back to the LA.

5. Discussion and recommendations

5.1 Overview of research and strengths and limitations of the evaluation

Early Permanence is an intervention that has a strong underpinning rationale based on the developmental needs of children: that getting children settled in a permanent placement as quickly as possible, and avoiding changes of caregivers in early life, can help establish positive and uninterrupted attachment relationships from a young age, a key factor in building children's resilience.

The use of EP has been encouraged in recent policy changes, and this evaluation examines a range of projects which were funded by Adoption England to push forward this agenda. Almost all projects worked on promoting EP placements through trying to influence professional understanding and views of this placement type and giving prospective adoptive parents more information about this option. The projects benefited from experienced leadership by people who had dedicated time to devote to the many tasks involved in keeping EP high on the agenda for children in their region. Some projects additionally worked on strengthening EP placements once made, through building in additional supports for EP carers to help them cope with uncertainty. A few projects attempted to also provide support for birth parents to help them better understand EP or they worked on supporting contact. Although not a key aim of any project, some projects did also develop professional understanding and resources around managing reunification.

In the main the projects delivered the activities they planned. They typically reported successes in goals such as changes in the understanding of professionals or EP carers, and the development of training and practice resources, and the implementation of new support systems. The impact on EP numbers (of carers willing to consider this and children placed in EP) is less clear, with projects citing contextual factors, particularly falling numbers of prospective adopters and greater complexity of children's needs, as being influential in preventing greater progress. Overall, however, the numbers and proportion of children placed in early permanence did show modest increases, and sometime significant increases in specific agencies. Some projects also felt that where EP had resulted in a number of reunification plans, this could undermine confidence in EP at a local level.

Previous research on EP is limited, and has predominantly focused on numbers of placements made, and early outcomes. This evaluation adds to the previous research through illuminating the value or otherwise of specific activities aimed at increasing and enhancing the use of EP. It underlines the importance of: clear leadership by people with time in their workload to focus on EP; good inter agency relationships and collaboration; support, information and training for professionals and EP carers; and the value of building in additional support to help carers manage uncertainty. These successes would benefit from being extended into the future and developed further. Future progress is

likely to be enhanced through explicitly building on what has worked in the pilots through a systematic development and sharing of practice materials, guidance and training across the country.

The evaluation also highlights areas of practice when new initiatives were often not successful, specifically the engagement of and development of support for birth parents, and a focus on better data collection around EP. In terms of the former, lessons could possibly be learned from previous research around the delivery of support services for birth parents. For example, the study by Neil et al. (2010) suggested that a very proactive outreach model of practice is needed to engage parents who are in the middle of court proceedings; that opportunities to support parents with contact can be a first step in engaging parents in broader support systems (contact support workers for example are often a key conduit of support, Copson, 2024); that working with professionals outside of children's social services who parents trust is important in encouraging use of birth parent support services. Trauma informed approaches are needed to build trust with parents who often have lifelong experiences of adversity (Mason et al, 2020).

The evaluation has some limitations. It primarily captured views from adoption team professionals – albeit often people who had detailed knowledge of their project. This was supplemented by some input from children's social workers, EP carers, and other stakeholders. A large number of projects were evaluated by a small evaluation team meaning data collection could only be 'light touch'. Feedback received was often anecdotal, and comprehensive data was scarce as project leads struggled to provide accurate data. The research began after projects were already underway or (in some cases) completed, requiring retrospective data and feedback. This led to changes in feedback methods and additional data requests from staff who were often not able to respond due to time constraints. Evaluating completed projects was particularly challenging due to staff turnover, resulting in a lighter evaluation approach based mainly on interviews with RAA leads who had some oversight of the projects.

A strength of the evaluation was that there was considerable overlap in the activities undertaken across the projects, enabling the team to examine specific activity areas using data from more than one project. Altogether 50 professionals gave their detailed feedback in interviews; these were supplemental by several other data sources. Although the data from any one project was limited, consistent messages were apparent when pooling the data and looking across projects. The projects typically did their best to devote time to helping with the evaluation, and research was well supported by Adoption England who shared their contacts and the information they received from projects. The involvement of multiple agencies across different contexts provided valuable insights and learning opportunities for future, more rigorous evaluations.

5.2 Recommendations and suggestions

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations and suggestions have been made to ensure that EP is appropriately supported and prioritised. These suggestions incorporate a national strategic approach to EP, as well as development work at a more

local level. It is acknowledged that some of these recommendations may not be financially viable but provide a starting point to work from to continue to improve and develop EP practice.

5.2.1 Recommendations for Adoption England

The recommendations in this section suggest EP practice is developed and co-ordinated on a national level, as well as at RAA and local authority level.

An EP Practice and Development Lead in Adoption England

It is recommended that there continues to be a key person in Adoption England with responsibility for overseeing EP and developing practice. There may be benefits to revising this role, for example by not only facilitating EP working groups, but also a source of advice and guidance on EP for practitioners across England. Therefore, it may be beneficial for this person to be a qualified social worker with significant experience of EP. Responsibilities could include:

Collaboration, engagement and coordination

- Work closely with EP leads across all RAAs through regular meetings to surface local challenges and identify national trends.
- Facilitate ongoing collaboration via structured working groups and forums to share insights and strengthen practice.
- Maintain a practitioner-focused approach by coordinating efforts, streamlining communication, and ensuring alignment across stakeholders.

Resource development and knowledge sharing

- Curate and review existing materials generated by the projects to build a comprehensive national portfolio of good quality EP resources, complete with practical guidance for implementation (e.g. as has been carried out in the area of maintaining relationships).
- Promote the dissemination of the resources. Keep EP leads informed of key developments, events, and tools through regular newsletters and targeted communications.

Data and training Infrastructure

- Design and manage a simple, standardised national data set to accurately reflect EP usage and inform strategic decisions (see below for further suggestions).
- Co-ordinate with Coram-I to try to better understand concerns about data accuracy.
- Consider the development of national EP training programmes, tailored to various roles such as newly qualified social workers, to embed best practice across the sector. The process of educating others about EP needs to be continuous rather than one time.

National offer of therapeutic support to EP carers

Feedback from practitioners identified that where carers were experiencing significant challenges and/or where the placement was at risk of breakdown, timely access to enhanced therapeutic support was extremely valuable in order to support carers' emotional wellbeing, promote positive carer/child relationships and prevent placement breakdown. It appears that while upskilling adoption social workers is a crucial part of EP development, there are some circumstances where independent and specialised support is required. An example of this type of support being successful was in Adopt East. The counselling was only utilised six times, suggesting this is not a level of service that most families will need. But in complex cases it may have a significant impact on family functioning.

It is therefore suggested that a national offer of therapeutic support for EP carers is implemented. This is likely to not only benefit families who are struggling but may be an incentive to prospective adopters considering EP if they know this offer of support is available to them if needed. A list of regional therapists could be put together from those therapists that have been used by projects where feedback has been positive.

Further work on engaging and supporting birth parents

A focus on working with birth parents, either to produce resources, engage them in EP processes or offer support was an aim of several projects, but impact and success in this area was very limited. Given the challenges that projects reported in this area, it is recommended that a national approach is taken to this area of work, drawing on practitioners who are skilled in working and engaging with birth parents to scope out what birth parents may find helpful. This national level work should involve birth parents with the aim that developments are co-produced.

- To ensure progress is made in this frequently neglected area of practice, the establishment of a project lead and project group to drive change and co-produce resources needed by parents involved with EP is recommended, possibly in collaboration with an external agency experienced in supporting/advocating for birth parents.
- This work of this project group at a national level would then need to be promoted by early permanence leads within RAAs to ensure local support systems and services are developed.
- In addition to the development of bespoke resources needed for parents in EP, the use of existing resources for all birth parents in adoption should be more widely promoted. Examples of existing resources that are likely to be helpful include HOPE boxes to support parents where children are removed at birth (as is very common outcome in EP) (Mason et al., 2023); best practice guidelines for when children are removed at birth (Mason et al., 2022); the birth family support mapping tool developed by the Family Rights Group ([Support and information services for birth families affected by adoption in England - Family Rights Group](#)) and other resources and agencies highlighted on Adoption England's website.

Building evaluation in from the start of projects

Some of the limitations of this evaluation were borne out of the fact that the evaluation commenced part way through projects starting, or for some, after they had ended. In future, a more comprehensive and accurate evaluation could be undertaken, if required, if built into proposals from the start.

5.2.2 Recommendations for Regional Adoption Agencies and Local Authorities

Employment of an EP lead in each RAA/VAA

A short-term focused approach to EP has been found to contribute to improvements in practice and an increase in EP placements, but these gains may be lost once an EP lead role ceases. The evident value of EP leadership in achieving short term changes seen in this evaluation reflects the research into how organisational changes can be implemented in initial stages of introducing new practices. Implementation science however emphasises that implementing change is a process not a one-time activity; short term change is often fragile and going back to the status quo after initial implementation is common (Fixsen, Van Dyke & Blaise, 2019). Leadership is a key driver of initiating and sustaining change, the role moving from initially championing the need for change to effectively managing the ongoing systems (e.g. staff recruitment and training, administrative and data management support, quality control) needed to bed in changes over time (Fixsen et al, 2019). Therefore, to sustain change and improvements where these have occurred, it would be beneficial for each RAA to have an employed EP specific lead worker whose main focus is on driving EP forward, liaising with local authority managers and frontline social workers. VAAs may also consider employing an EP lead. The suggestion for the role to be RAA/VAA level is due to the significant challenges that many project leads have encountered when working across multiple agencies/local authorities. Where leads only covered a small area, or one agency, this was better able to be managed and generally had more impact.

What has been identified in this evaluation is the challenges of attempting to develop a discreet area of practice whilst balancing the responsibilities of another role, which will almost always take priority. It is clear from the evaluation that allowance in their workload to undertake this role is essential so they can take a primary focus on EP, at least part time if not full time.

Responsibilities of EP leads may include:

- Co-ordinating EP champions across local authorities in the RAA (see below).
- Developing area specific training, practices and procedures.
- Helping to disseminate and embed resources developed at a national level.
- Ensuring the needs of birth parents are kept on the agenda and the use of resources and services for birth parents are actively promoted.
- Consultations with Children's Social Workers.
- Consultations with Adoption Social Workers

- Offering additional support to EP carers where required.
- Arranging therapeutic support for EP carers where necessary.
- Tracking EP data within the agency and local authorities
- Ensuring fostering regulations are appropriately implemented and adhered to.
- Linking in with children's social workers when notified of a child who is being considered for adoption.

This role would involve management responsibility and oversight. The seniority that this person may need to have needs to be considered.

Consideration could also be given to developing a separate EP team within the RAA, focusing on assessing EP carers, linking children with carers, supporting and manager carers and potentially offering support to birth families. One project already had this in place which they reported to work very well, and it was also suggested as a potential option by other interviewees.

Implementation of EP champions in each local authority

EP champions in LAs would need to be committed to the role and be given adequate time to dedicate to engaging in practice development work. This role could help tackle ongoing challenges around ensuring children's social workers fully understand Early Permanence and apply it appropriately in practice. The value of champions is promoting early permanence is also highlighted in the very useful good practice guide by Dibben & Howorth (2017, pp 48-9 and 109). They argue the usefulness of champions particularly in working with different teams (e.g. liaising with legal teams and mentoring children's social workers) to help drive culture change across the system, and for active case management.

Offer of a robust support offer to all EP carers

This may include group peer support, a buddy system, enhanced therapeutic training for adoption social workers and/or access to independent therapeutic counselling.

Any support offer should be made clear to prospective EP carers early on as this may incentivise them to consider EP, if they know they will be well supported if they encounter challenges or struggle with certain aspects of the process. Some projects in the evaluation developed significant expertise in supporting carers through and after reunification, and this expertise could be more widely shared so that each RAA has plans in the place to support carers in these circumstances.

Where training for prospective adopters has not already been revised, consideration should be given to this taking place, given the reported successes of this activity area.

5.2.3 Recommendations for the Department for Education

Continuation of funding for development work on EP

These projects, whilst they had their limitations and challenges, have led to overall practice improvements in EP and for many areas, and increase in the use of EP. Without sustained resources improvements may be lost, as projects who have had short term funding in the past have noted. It is recommended that further funding is allocated to continue the development of EP in order to utilise it for as many children as possible, where this is appropriate to do so. The research by Trivedi et al (2023) suggests this investment could be offset by costs savings of increased use of EP.

5.3 Summary

Collectively, this program of work has contributed to raising awareness and understanding of EP and has begun to foster greater consistency in EP practice across England. However, as one social worker noted, there remains ‘a long way to go’. Ongoing challenges in adopter recruitment, coupled with rising numbers of children awaiting adoption, are likely to continue to affect EP delivery in the foreseeable future. However, it is promising that despite these wider challenges, projects generally maintained or improved EP numbers, and improved practice. The literature review and stakeholder interviews assert that EP offers significant benefits for young children who are unlikely going to be able to live permanently with their birth families. The commitment and passion demonstrated by practitioners across the country provide a strong foundation for continued progress and innovation in EP practice, albeit in perhaps a different way than short-term funded projects.

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Appendix 1: Project summaries

Adoption Partnership South East (APSE)

Adoption Partnership South East (APSE) is a Regional Adoption Agency that was established in November 2020. It is a partnership of three local authorities: Kent County Council, the London Borough of Bexley, and Medway Council.

Project overview

When APSE was formed as an RAA, a bespoke EP team was created and EP was therefore relatively well embedded across the region, particularly in two of the LAs. The project aims, therefore, were focused on one area of practice – support for EP carers and birth parents. The first aim was to enhance the support to EP carers with the introduction of a ‘wraparound’ support service, ensuring consistency across the region. The Theory of Change noted that several EP carers had required additional support via the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) within a few months of placement. This suggested that support during the EP period was potentially not robust enough. It was also identified that birth parents did not have access to any specific support during the EP process. A further strand of the project aimed to enhance social workers’ understanding of EP.

The funding was used for the following activities:

- Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP³) level 1 training for all adoption staff, and level 2 training for some.
- Psychological support/consultations to EP practitioners/managers.
- Commissioning of independent therapeutic support to EP carers where needed.
- Development of the role of Permanency Planning Leads to link with and advise children’s social workers at an early stage of planning (linked with the RAA’s matching project).
- Development of an online training tool to assist social workers’ understanding of EP.
- Quarterly training workshops on EP for social workers, embedding this into the RAA annual training programme.
- Birth parent support offered by an independent agency

³ DDP is a therapeutic intervention model designed to support families with adopted or fostered children who have experienced early life trauma. DDP level 1 training introduces the core concepts and their application in working with families. Level 2 training offers more advanced skills development. [About Training - DDP Network](#)

Methods

Interviews were undertaken with the RAA lead, project lead, adoption service manager, adoption team manager and a permanency planning lead. An interview was also undertaken with one set of EP carers. Four feedback forms were completed by EP carers who'd had a child placed in the previous 12 months.

Findings

Was the project delivered as intended?

All activities identified at the outset of the evaluation were completed. There was a change to staffing of the project early on, but both project members had already had some involvement in the project, so their shift in roles did not impact the project significantly.

The DDP training was reported to be well attended (74 social workers/managers and therapists completed Level 1, 16 completed Level 2).

While the birth parent support was delivered as intended, the take up from parents was lower than expected, and it was not felt to be a particularly successful activity. The team reported that offering support 'in house' via Permanency Planning Leads was being trialled and had been more successful due to them having knowledge of the family and history.

How the project affected EP practice and outcomes

- Feedback from social workers was positive about the use of DDP, which was being used not only with EP carers but also with other professionals e.g. when chairing meetings. Professionals felt that the model helped them work in a more reflective way with families and each other, leading to greater understanding and tolerance of difficult feelings.
- Initial feedback received from EP carers was not as positive as the team had expected. However, the feedback form covered all aspects of support, not specifically support from the adoption team. The revision of the feedback form to differentiate adoption support from local authority support indicated that carers were generally very satisfied with the adoption team support. This was underlined in the interview with the EP carers and written feedback from others.
- An increase in the number of EP placements occurred in 2023/24 and overall the percentage of children placed in EP was maintained averaging 28% over the last three years encompassing the project timescales.
- Regarding post-adoption support, figures identified that immediate ASGSF applications following an EP placement dropped significantly (in 2022/23 7 of 21 EP families applied for ASGSF funding. In 2024/25, 0 of 19 families applied). The implementation of additional support during the EP period may account for this, though there may be other factors at play.

- DDP consultations for EP social workers were not utilised as often as expected. Reported potential reasons for this included the speed of EP placements and consultations being seen as something to use when there is a specific issue, rather than to provide space to explore feelings about the process in general.
- The birth parent support offered was not deemed to be as successful by the project team as hoped. Thirty-four referrals for 42 individuals were made. Twelve parents accepted support, 10 partially engaged and 19 did not engage. It was reported by the project team that the speed of the EP process impacted how quickly support could be put in place, and parents found it difficult having another professional involved in an already busy professional network.

Key learning from implementation

Having an established EP scheme, with dedicated EP team, enabled this project to implement changes. Covering only one RAA meant that activities were able to be easily implemented across the whole area. A key success was the reduction in applications for post placement support from the ASGLB, suggesting the enhanced in-house support had been effective. Implementing support for birth parents needs the right approach. All project activities will continue beyond the funded period, aside from the independent birth parent support service.

One Adoption

The project covered the whole of One Adoption, which is made up of three RAAs – One Adoption West Yorkshire (OAWY)⁴, One Adoption South Yorkshire (OASY)⁵ and One Adoption North and Humber (OANH)⁶. The project was led by OAWY.

Project overview

One Adoption received funding for two projects. The first ('project 1') intended to explore the use of EP for older children and sibling groups through an alliance between OAWY and a group of local VAAs. This project was not included in the evaluation as it was not possible to collect any significant data. From an interview with the OAWY lead, it was reported that problems were encountered early on due to the VAAs having different priorities to the RAA, e.g. consistent payments, and them struggling to recruit EP carers who would take children from these groups. The RAA lead suggested, therefore, that this aspect of the work did not really get off the ground.

The second project aimed to increase the use of EP across the region and develop and improve practice. The project team reported that the use of EP varied across the three RAAs, with OAWY not using it at all in recent years, despite being an early adopter of the scheme, whereas EP numbers from OASY and OANH indicated they were performing better and there was an opportunity identified for OAWY to learn from their work.

Activities included:

- Employment of a part time EP project lead in OAWY to co-ordinate the project.
- Introduction of EP champions in some adoption teams where they were not already in place.
- Development of training materials, including a webinar for children's SWs and other professionals.
- Establish an agreed data set to be collated in relation to EP in all areas.
- Developing processes and practices in relation to EP matching.
- Development and introduction of mandatory pre-recorded training for prospective adopters across the region.
- Reviewing the training offered to EP carers to ensure content and delivery was consistent across the region.
- Development of a peer support service for EP carers, provided by an external organisation.
- Working alongside agencies to engage birth parents to make sure their voices are heard in the EP process.

⁴ Covering Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield

⁵ Covering Barnsley, City of Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield

⁶ Covering East Riding, Hull, North East Lincolnshire, North Yorkshire and York

- Developing an assessment toolkit for adoption SWs undertaking assessments of EP carers.
- Developing an EP carer support plan which is set out when a child is placed with EP carers.
- Developing a webinar for support networks of EP carers.

Methods

Interviews were undertaken with the project lead, RAA leads (n=3) and an EP champion from OAWY. Project details were further clarified from interim and final project reports, and data were extracted from these reports.

Findings

Was the project delivered as intended?

- The project was partially delivered. Activity levels were not equal across the pan-region, with more activity level in the host RAA, particularly in years two and three, as it was easier to engage people and develop practice with familiar staff and processes.
- Collaboration across the three RAAs became harder over time due to changes in senior management. Changes in staff across the RAAs impacted engagement in practice development, with initial contacts being lost. One of the RAA leads reported to not have a lot of involvement in the project as it originated before they started.
- There were 17 LAs covered by the project; LA structures, stability and processes affected how well EP changes could be implemented at a local level.
- Getting data from OASY and OANH was difficult. One RAA reported difficulties with providing the data to the project lead as it would have required time-consuming manual extraction from their database.
- Peer support for carers offered through an external agency was trialled but engagement wasn't as expected, and the team found that informal local linking worked better.
- There were challenges in engaging birth parents to better reflect their voice in EP processes. A national co-ordinated approach to gather parents' views was suggested.

How the project affected EP practice and outcomes

- Use of EP increased in OAWY. The table below (Table 6) outlines EP figures (children placed in EP and adopters offering EP) across all three RAAs covered by the project.

Table 6: One Adoption EP figures

	OAWY		OASY		OANH	
	Number of children placed in EP (% of all children placed for adoption)	% of adopters approved that would consider EP	Number of children placed in EP (% of all children placed for adoption)	% of adopters approved that would consider EP	Number of children placed EP (% of all children placed for adoption)	% of adopters approved that would consider EP
2021/22	13 (7%)	22%	19 (23%)	68%	40 (36%)	18%
2022/23	23 (14%)	24%	23 (29%)	14%	Not provided	Not provided
2023/24	24 (14%)	39%	28 (24%)	0%	15 (27%)	Not provided
2024/25	38 (22%)	34%	13 (15%)	4%	10 (27%)	Not provided

- The figures reflect the project team’s view that there was more EP development activity in OAWY (who had the lowest starting point) than the other two RAAs, with OAWY seeing an increase in both the number of children placed EP as well as the number of adopters approved that would consider it. OASY saw a drop in both figures across the course of the project. The data provided by OANH were limited but the proportion of children placed in EP dropped from 36% to 27%. For two of the RAAs at least there were not enough adopters to meet demand, which was thought to have impacted on EP numbers.
- The project team reported particular success and impact from having an EP lead to co-ordinate and have oversight of EP, particularly in the host RAA. The project lead had to also carry out their existing team manager role and could not focus solely on the project. The EP lead helped facilitate improvements that stakeholders felt may not have happened otherwise.
- Those interviewed felt that EP was now ‘on people’s radar’, including Children’s Social Workers, CAFCASS and the courts. However, the project team felt that some professionals remained concerned about using EP because of the risk that adoption would not be the final plan.
- EP champions (RAA specific) had a positive impact on linking EP carers and children, reviewing relevant documents and keeping EP under consideration with individual teams.

- EP carer training across the region was reviewed. A pre-recorded video for preparation training was developed and was used by two out of three of the RAAs. This was reported to pique prospective adopters' curiosity about EP and led to an increase in the numbers of prospective adopters signing up for the standalone EP training in OAWY.
- A newly implemented database system in OAWY made it easy to extract and filter EP data as required, which highlighted areas of practice that required development, and areas of success.
- Networking was supported by having a Teams channel where EP information was shared.
- The framework for EP carer support plans was developed. This model involved trying to identify and mobilize sources of support in the carers' own family networks, alongside professional support that might be needed. The plans included contingencies for support in the case of the child returning to the birth family. This framework was a particularly useful guide for practitioners when reunification occurred. The webinar for friends and family members of EP carers was delivered.
- The assessment toolkit for working with prospective EP carers was developed, using case studies. We were unable to collect any feedback about this.

Key learning from implementation

The project was successfully implemented in the host RAA (where the most improvement was needed), where the most impact was reported. The pan-regional element of the project faced challenges, and activity levels were not equal across the region. The other two RAAs, who had some history of success in promoting EP, did not appear to sustain this progress in the face of management changes and challenges with adopter recruitment/sufficiency.

PACT/Adopt South

This project was a collaboration between a VAA, PACT, and an RAA, Adopt South.⁷ The project lead was based in PACT. PACT and Adopt South had a different starting point with EP. Adopt South (AS) had always been sufficient with EP carers and had EP carer training embedded in their standard preparation training. For PACT, there were limited numbers of prospective adopters offering EP and minimal training for prospective EP carers. Hence each agency had a slightly different focus in terms of activities implemented.

Project overview

The project had a relatively broad remit, which included growing an understanding of EP for professionals, wider stakeholders and prospective adopters and developing resources for practice. Activities included:

- Employment of two EP support workers/co-ordinators, one in each agency.
- Development of a resource pack for professionals and prospective EP carers.
- Development of half day training for prospective EP carers (PACT).
- Production of eight webinars, hosted on CATCH (an online community hub).
- Online training for Newly Qualified Social Workers.
- Production of an animation for birth parents to help them understand EP.
- Offering additional support for EP carers at all stages, including advice and guidance from a support worker, a peer support group, buddy scheme and stronger support from adoption social workers.
- Direct work with prospective and approved EP carers where required, including a specialist support offer if a placement ends.

Methods

- Data on the progress of children's EP plans were provided, together with the numbers of prospective adopters open to Early Permanence.
- Feedback forms were completed by seven adoption social workers from PACT, and 6 LA Social workers.
- Feedback on the CATCH webinars was provided (n= 50),
- 43 carers provided written feedback (29 on PACT EP training, 13 on a Q&A session run by Adopt South and one PACT carer on their EP experience overall.
- Interviews with the project lead, team manager and EP support worker from PACT, and the family finding manager and service manager from Adopt South.

⁷ Covering Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton

Findings

Was the project delivered as intended?

- The project encountered some initial challenges around legal restrictions related to data sharing, impacting the inter-agency collaboration. This led some delays in implementation.
- Two EP support workers (both with lived experience of adoption) were recruited.
- Dedicated therapeutic support for carers was part of the original proposal but this was not pursued in AS as it was not something that could be financially sustained in the long term by the RAA, with support coming from in-house instead. PACT were offering therapeutic support via their in house 'Strengthening Families' team where necessary.
- Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) training (one hour, online) was delivered by AS.
- PACT developed their own EP standalone training and a resource pack for carers was produced to complement this.
- PACT started their own support group for EP carers as part of the project, facilitated by their EP support worker. They also developed further their buddy/mentor scheme. AS ran two sessions of a peer group but stopped this when EP numbers dropped and it was no longer feasible to run.
- An initial aim of the project was to offer additional support to birth parents. This was an activity area that encountered challenges across the duration of the project as professionals felt the timing of trying to engage parents during proceedings was not right. The project team identified a need to explore birth parents' support needs further. One parent benefitted from referral to an external support provider.

How the project affected EP practice and outcomes

- The numbers of carers offering EP in both agencies increased – in PACT from 27 in 2022/3 to 35 two years later, and in AS 44 in 23/4 to 64 a year later.
- The percentage of adopters open to EP who went on to have an EP placement dropped across the three years for PACT and the two years of available data for Adopt South. This may be linked to the broader context of an increase in children waiting for adoption meaning that some prospective EP carers may have had a child placed via the traditional adoption route.
- Between 23/24 and 24/25, both PACT and Adopt South saw an increase in the number of children placed with EP carers, and the percentage of adopted children placed in EP. In PACT numbers increased from 8 in 23/4 to 17 the following year; in AS the corresponding increase was from 44 to 64.
- Having dedicated workers who did not have any other role to juggle meant that there was a clear focus on the development of EP. This was reported to work very well, particularly in PACT who created a legacy of training and resources.
- Training for newly qualified social workers was rated highly and was felt to have raised the visibility of EP. One knowledge gap that remained was in implementing fostering regulations.

- Training for EP carers was well received, and it was reported that it had made a significant impact on how prepared and knowledgeable prospective adopters were.
- Professionals felt that dedicated support for EP carers (via the support workers) was crucial, particularly when considering the additional emotional toll and uncertainty that EP carers experience. Some concerns were expressed that having someone in this role may lead to assessing SWs being too quick to relinquish what should be their responsibility for support.
- The peer support group offered by PACT had good uptake. Carers formed links that extended outside of the group. They valued connecting to people in similar situations as being a single carer or already having children in the family; these types of connections were facilitated through the buddy system. Support group members appreciated having a facilitator who was not a social worker but an adoptive parent, leading to them feeling more open to talk and ask questions.
- The animation for birth parents was produced and has been made widely available through Adoption England's website: [Early Permanence Information for Parents Resources | Adoption England](#). We have no feedback on its impact as the film had only just been completed at time of follow up.

Key learning from implementation

Whilst this project experienced challenges related to project set up, a broad scope and recruitment/retention of the project team, a significant amount of work was undertaken to develop EP across PACT and Adopt South. Progress was made towards increasing the number of adopters open to EP, and the number of children placed with EP and new resources and services were developed. Overall, feedback on the various activity areas was positive and practice improvements were reported.

Adopt East/Adoption Connects

This project was a pan-regional collaboration between two RAAs. Adopt East is a regional adoption agency, formed in 2020, made up of an alliance of eight local authorities⁸ and one VAA (Barnardo's). Adoption Connects is a regional adoption agency, formed in 2019, made up of two local authorities: Central Bedfordshire Council and Milton Keynes City Council. Adopt East were the lead agency on the project.

Project overview

The project ran between November 2022 and March 2025 and, following a significant drop in EP numbers, aimed to increase use of EP across the region through the following activities:

- employing a full time EP Lead (manager); identifying EP champions (known as leads) in all LAs; creating an EP working group for all EP champions.
- enhancing professional knowledge and skills through developing a suite of leaflets covering different topics, running conferences and training events, holding engagement events with wider stakeholders such as CAF/CASS.
- offering of independent therapeutic support for social workers
- developing training and information leaflets for prospective EP carers
- enhancing support EP carers via referrals to independent therapeutic support, providing online and face-to-face peer support groups
- enhancing support for birth parents through development of an information leaflet, plus further consideration of birth parents' support needs.

Methods

- Interviews with the project lead and two focus groups with EP leads/champions (n=6).
- Interview with one adoption social worker who had referred carers for counselling.
- Interview with one set of EP carers (a couple).
- Feedback forms from social workers who had attended mini conferences (n=37)
- ASGLC data provided by the project lead across three years (22/23/24).
- Feedback forms re. therapeutic counselling (n=4).
- Feedback forms from prospective EP carers re. training.

⁸ Covering Bedford, Essex, Hertfordshire, Luton, Norfolk, Southend-on-Sea, Suffolk and Thurrock. VAAs Adoptionplus and Barnardo's are also part of the alliance.

Findings

Was the project delivered as intended?

Most of the activities were delivered as intended:

- An EP lead was recruited and played a central role in facilitating other activities across the region. Early Permanence champions were identified in some local authorities but not all. Some smaller LAs did not identify champions, and champions were not always replaced if they changed jobs.
- Resources were developed for EP carers and professionals. The project ran two large conferences and three mini conferences. The EP working group was initially held bi-monthly but was reduced to every 12 weeks due a reduction in attendees.
- The offer of therapeutic counselling for social workers was put in place, but this service received no referrals despite almost all EP leads being aware that the service was available.
- A full day's training on EP for prospective carers was developed and used consistently across the region; some agencies have made this training mandatory. In some agencies this built significantly on their existing offer; in others it consolidated their training already in place.
- Independent therapeutic support/counselling was accessed by 6 families. One agency did not make referrals to this service as they already had in-house provision.
- Online peer support groups for EP carers were held monthly and were joined by between 5-11 sets of carers per session. No face-to-face groups were held.
- Aside from a leaflet aimed at birth parents, the project lead advised this did not end up being a particular area of focus.
- With the project lead being based in Adopt East, the collaboration with the VAA Adoption Connects was relatively limited, but they were involved in development work.

How the project affected EP practice and outcomes

- Across the project timescales, the numbers of children placed with EP carers remained stable (ranging from 26 to 30). The percentage of adoptions that were EP placements was 16.5% in 2022 to 2023, 11.4% in 2023 to 2024 and 13.9% and 2024 to 2025.
- The role of the EP lead was generally highly valued by social workers who felt this had helped to improve training and bringing professionals together at various events. The EP lead was able to offer advice and signpost to resources to teams and individuals, though some felt this was more available in the lead's host local authority than elsewhere. Where no EP carers were available in one local authority, the EP lead was a key person that social workers could contact to help explore pan- regional matches.
- The impact of EP champions was variable. Some champions were more proactive than others, but active champions were felt to have kept the EP option at the fore in their agency. There was some feedback that undertaking the champions role alongside regular job commitments was challenging. Champions valued having increased focus

on EP at regional and national level - this helped them not to feel like a lone voice in advocating for this permanency route.

- The resource pack for EP carers was valued by those who received it. They appreciated having a physical resource pack to take away from training.
- Feedback from professionals who attended training events (n= 37) showed that people felt the training was relevant and that it increased their confidence in assessing prospective adopters for EP. Hearing from someone with lived experience of EP, learning about EP for siblings, and discussing the concept of “safe uncertainty” were all highly valued. EP champions also valued the conferences, finding these helpful learning and networking opportunities. Knowledge gaps within children’s frontline teams were identified as an ongoing problem. People also wanted more information about managing reunification.
- The EP working group provided a forum to discuss practice issues and share ideas, and for members to experience informal group supervision in terms of discussing challenges of the work. Overall feedback on the group was positive.
- Therapeutic counselling for social workers did not seem to be needed, possibly because staff were using the EP working group and/or supervision with managers to discuss difficulties. One EP champion was not aware of this offer of support.
- EP training for carers was reported to be improved (by carers and EP champions) e.g. carers who were wanting to adopt via EP for a second time noted how much better they felt the training was. EP champions valued having access to shared resources for training and they felt that confidence in how EP carers were being trained and prepared had increased.
- Only limited feedback was available regarding the families who had used therapeutic support and counselling, but what feedback was available was highly positive. A social worker of one family who used the support felt that this had been instrumental in improving relationships between the carers and the child and ultimately preventing placement breakdown. Two families who accessed the counselling both rated it as very helpful. They appreciated the support with living with uncertainty and sharing fears and worries without judgement. However, it was suggested that it was somewhat stressful to be only offered four sessions at a time. The specific scenarios where social workers believed therapeutic, independent support is required were when reunification is a likely or is happening, where care proceedings are protracted, and/or where there is a high level of uncertainty around viability of family members.
- The EP peer support group was very well received. The online format enabled people across a wide geographical area to join, although some felt that local face-to-face groups would also be helpful as it would be easier for people to connect off-line. Some challenges around managing the group dynamic were noted.
- The following activities will remain in place now that the project has ended: online support groups, the stand-alone training day for EP carers, the written resources for EP carers and professionals.
- A range of ongoing challenges were reported:
 - The number of EP placements was impacted by EP plans not being agreed by professionals and wider stakeholders i.e. court/CAFCASS.

- Concerns were raised regarding EP carers being utilised for children with Placement Orders due to issues with adopter sufficiency.
- Adoption social workers identified that there remains a myth amongst children's social workers that legal agreement is required for an EP placement.
- Local authority funding cuts have increased pressure on staff, with EP being an area of practice that needs supporting alongside many others.

Key learning from implementation

Undertaking practice development work over an RAA which is set up as an alliance is particularly challenging due to working with several LAs all of whom have their own adoption service. The project was one of only a few who offered external therapeutic support for carers. This had relatively low demand, being mainly accessed by carers who were struggling. For the small numbers who used it, however, the service was highly valued suggesting this high tier support is useful as part of a range of support services.

Adopt London/Coram

This project was a collaboration between Adopt London, consisting of four RAAs (Adopt London North⁹, Adopt London South¹⁰, Adopt London East¹¹ and Adopt London West¹²) and Coram (VAA). The RAAs cover 24 London boroughs.

Project overview

Background concerns were about the generally low use of EP across London, the highly varied approach to EP across the RAAs and the difficulty of achieving a uniform approach given the large number of boroughs (n=32) covered by the 5 agencies. Key project activities included:

- An overall full time EP project lead.
- Production of resources for SWs, including a practice guide.
- Review of Adopt London websites to support EP carer recruitment.
- A London conference to target the judiciary, CAFCASS and legal representatives
- Monthly workshops with Children's SWs and adoption SWs.
- Leaflets and video resources for EP carers and birth parents (working with other EP projects).
- Development of a London wide database of EP carers and children needing an EP placement.
- Revision of EP carer training to roll out a 1.5 day offer (1 day in-person, half day online) moving from Coram providing all EP carer training across London to it being delivered by the RAAs.

Methods

Interviews were undertaken with:

- Project lead/manager
- Consultant from Coram
- five EP champions (known as leads)
- One CAFCASS service manager

Some feedback data were provided from EP carer training and professional conferences but there were limitations as to what could be drawn from these due to only basic questions being asked.

⁹ Covering Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey and Islington

¹⁰ Covering Croydon, Greenwich, Kingston, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Richmond, Sutton, Southwark and Wandsworth

¹¹ Covering Barking & Dagenham, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Havering

¹² Covering Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham and Hounslow

Findings

Was the project delivered as intended?

- Rolling training for social workers, held online and in person was delivered. While online attendance was higher, in-person sessions yielded greater engagement and more interactive discussions. EP workshop training for social workers was well received (all but one rating it 4 or 5 out of 5, scale unknown).
- EP carers' training was revised and delivered across all agencies, facilitated by the EP lead.
- Regular EP meetings were held every 6 weeks, enabling early identification of possible links and sharing of practice learning.
- A range of information materials were produced for practitioners. For example, a consultation document 'EP considerations' was developed to aid social workers in decision-making.
- Role of the EP lead (who was seen as energetic, enthusiastic, and approachable) was seen as central to building the profile of EP across the region. EP champions reported the EP lead undertook development work that they would never have had time to do. Having this central person was viewed as achieving greater coherence of approach across London.

How the project affected EP practice and outcomes

- The proportion of adopted children placed via EP held up at about 20% over the years of the project, despite concerns about falling numbers of adopters and increasing child complexity. EP champions reported that each of their RAAs had seen an increase in EP referrals since the EP lead/manager has been in place.
- Consistent training for adopters across the region increased confidence in sending adopters on other RAA's training.
- Newly produced documents were seen to have improved the links between children and carers, e.g. a 'linking and selection' document, similar to a matching document to ensure due consideration has been given to the suitability of EP carers for a particular child.
- New written guidance was seen as having led to greater consideration of and clarity about EP amongst practitioners such as contact workers and children's social workers.
- Improvements were noticed in working relationships with local VAAs.
- EP carers were seen as being more child focused as a result of more robust training.
- An EP champion reported that more recently a Judge and a Guardian have asked why the LA were not looking at EP, indicating an increase in knowledge of EP amongst the judiciary and Cafcass.
- Challenges experienced included:
 - Concerns that when the EP lead role ends, there will be no-one to push practice forward and facilitate training and positive changes will be lost. One suggestion proposed was to create an EP hub to sustain momentum.

- General consensus that EP feels more complex now, and is therefore more uncertain for EP carers.
- It was not possible to streamline everything across all four RAAs as each had their own policies, procedures and existing ways of working. Engagement with the project varied across the different agencies.
- Data collection was challenging, partly due to a lack of engagement and no systems in place to track or obtain certain types of data.
- Whilst a colleague reported an increase in Guardians' understanding of EP following the EP lead's engagement with CAF/CASS, it was felt that more training targeted at CAF/CASS would be beneficial.
- EP carers were not necessarily being used for EP.
- There was not enough diversity within the EP carer pool to ensure appropriate cultural matches were made.
- High social work turnover reduced the impact of training, suggesting a rolling program is needed.

Key learning from implementation

Successes were identified in having an EP lead to drive the development of EP practice and facilitate and co-ordinate activities, particularly EP carer training, but sustainability was raised as a significant concern without ongoing funding.

Northeast/Cumbria

The project involved four RAAs (Adopt Tees Valley¹³, Adopt North East¹⁴, Coast to Coast¹⁵ and Cumbria¹⁶) and three VAAs – ARC Adoption, Caritas Care and Adoption Matters.

Project overview

The project aimed to develop EP across an area which did not have a high % of EP. Confidence in the EP process was low and complex cases (e.g. where children were reunified) had knocked confidence and led to risk aversion amongst social workers. The three RAAs were at different stages of development and EP was being done differently in each RAA. This then impacted VAAs (VAA partners were saying there was a lot of variation in delivery). The project aimed to improve consistency across the different agencies and by doing that increase numbers of EP placements.

Activities included:

- EP lead consultant in place.
- ‘Options’ paper written to consider the use of Concurrent Planning, Fostering for Adoption or both.
- Identification of EP champions (referred to as EP leads/project team) in the RAAs and VAAs.
- Development days with the project team and management board, focusing on different practice areas e.g. worksheets, websites/recruitment, training.
- Development of a recruitment strategy including a review of the website, all forms and development of a recruitment video.
- Trialled attendance at legal gateway meetings to identify children suitable for EP early on.
- Implementation of new EP data collection processes using a tracking tool/spreadsheet.
- Consideration of the use of LinkMaker for making links
- Development of two-day EP carer training across the pan-region, based on existing CoramBAAF training.
- Setting up support groups for EP carers in each RAA.
- Review of how fostering regulations were implemented across the agencies.
- Work on improving family time in EP, with the development of family time hubs.
- Marketing campaign.

¹³ Covering Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar & Cleveland and Stockton-on-Tees

¹⁴ North Tyneside, Gateshead, Newcastle, Northumberland and South Tyneside

¹⁵ Cumbria, Durham and Sunderland

¹⁶ Cumbria and West Moreland

Methods

Interviews were undertaken with the project lead and EP consultant/lead. Two focus groups were held, one with EP champions (known as leads) (n=6) and one with RAA and VAA leaders who formed the pan-regional management board (n=6). Spreadsheets summarising EP activity in 2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/25 (carers and children) were provided for all participating agencies. Monitory reports to Adoption England were reviewed.

Findings

Was the project delivered as intended?

- This project was able to carry out the majority of activities as planned.
- The project team, including champions' group, reported that having a project lead/consultant (who started in October 2022) that had significant knowledge and experience of EP was invaluable. They were able to attend both management meetings and champions meetings which helped ensure consistent working.
- Writing an options paper in the first instance was pivotal in decision making, bringing everyone together to decide on a plan moving forward – to pursue EP via reg 25a rather than following a true concurrency/dual approval model.
- Having an existing management board with regular meetings helped with collaboration; motivation for change was high.
- The agencies achieved high levels of collaboration – project leads/champions came together through monthly meetings to share knowledge and experience, including case discussions.
- It was reported that a significant amount of work went into reviewing agencies' websites, tools and processes to ensure consistent and appropriate messages about EP were given, which increased confidence of social workers to talk about EP to prospective adopters.
- The project team worked together to revise the CoramBAAF two-day EP carer training, which was then rolled out across all the agencies.
- A development day was held with representatives from all 14 LAs and RAAs to review fostering paperwork and processes
- Addressing challenges with family time was challenging. It was not possible to implement family time hubs due to the region covering such a vast geographical area (journeys to family time hubs would have been too long for all).

How the project affected EP practice and outcomes

Table 7 below outlines pan-regional EP data in relation to children placed EP and prospective adopters offering EP.

Table 7: EP figures for the North East & Cumbria

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	% increase across three years
Numbers of Children placed EP	43	53	68	58%
Adopters offering EP	56	81	85	52%

Table 7 highlights for this project there was a significant year-on-year increase in the number of children being placed with EP carers and the number of adopters open to EP, suggesting that the EP project had a very positive effect on EP in that particular area. These figures, however, do not match those published by Coram-i (for this area, only 40 EP placements were recorded in 2024/25 for example). This is an issue discussed further in section 4.3.

- The visibility of EP increased across the area, primarily down to the work of the project lead.
- An increase in both recruitment of EP carers and placement of children in EP was achieved across the region, though it was reported that there were fewer EP carers approved than children needing to be placed. Potential EP carers were being linked with young babies with Placement Orders.
- The champions' group reported an increase in referrals for EP placements, suggesting that children's social workers were now more aware of it as a placement option. However, this increase demand could not always be met due to adopter insufficiency.
- Knowledge of EP for children's social workers was still identified as a challenge in some areas, however. Some teams were on board with using EP whereas others struggled as they saw EP as pre-empting the court decision. The inclusion of training on EP during the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) was suggested.
- Development days with the champions group helped to embed practice and make connections across agencies.
- One challenge identified with ensuring consistency in practice was that all agencies had a different approach to EP paperwork such as linking documents.
- Champions were given time to commit to the project – a lot of time was needed in the early stages and without that ringfenced time, individuals would have struggled to make this work.

- Case discussions between champions allowed for sharing, exploration and supporting each other.
 - EP has been really embedded across the pan-region, with agencies working together as a system. This was aided by the fact that RAAs and VAAs needed each other – RAAs did not have sufficient adopters and there was existing protocol to work with VAAs to place children within the region.
 - Data tracking worked well and was viewed as a ‘game changer’ in terms of seeing figures and comparing to previous years. There was a need to ensure clarity on what and how data should be recorded to achieve accuracy. Project leads queried the accuracy of Coram-i data. For example, national data suggested 3% of all adoptions were EP in the region, whereas project leads believed it to be 20-25%.
 - Consistent training for EP carers across the across the region was developed. This was valued by champions who felt more confident in making interagency placements.
 - An EP conference was run which was very well attended and still talked about. This was perceived as having got EP on people’s minds.
 - Attendance at legal gateway meetings was achieved in some areas. However, this didn’t result in a dramatic increase in referrals.
 - It was noted that undertaking EP development work was time consuming on top of the ‘day job’.

Key learning from implementation

Overall, the collaboration in this project between RAAs and VAAs made it very successful. This built on existing positive relationships between the involved agencies and was key to its success, as was the commitment and enthusiasm of the whole project team (including champions). The data reflect the hard work that has gone into the development of EP, but individual practitioners who continue to champion EP will need allocated time to commit to the project in the long term.

Northwest (Older Children)

The project covered four RAAs – Adoption Counts¹⁷, Together for Adoption¹⁸, Adoption in Merseyside¹⁹, Adopt Lancashire and Blackpool and Adoption Now²⁰, as well as four VAAs (Adoption Matters, Caritas Care, Nugent and Barnardo’s).

Project overview

While EP was established in the Northwest in 2014, the scheme was primarily being used only for babies and toddlers aged two and under. It was identified that EP was underutilised for older children due to a lack of awareness and confidence that EP can be used for older children, and those children were being ‘timed out’ of adoption due to court delays. The project therefore aimed to increase understanding of how and when EP could be used for older children and offer additional preparation to prospective EP carers for older children.

Activities included:

- Identification of EP champions in each agency.
- Monthly EP sessions for social workers.
- Development of bi-monthly therapeutic training for prospective EP carers for older children.
- Development of EP resources for professionals and EP carers e.g. a glossary of terms and calendar of appointments for EP carers, utilising joint working across the region.
- Development of 11 films on myth busting topics (in collaboration with the region’s matching project).
- Development of resources/books for older children.
- EP newsletter
- Consultations as part of any referral for an EP placement for an older child.
- Marketing campaigns (x 2, but not EP-specific)

Methods

Interviews were undertaken with the RAA Lead and Project lead.

Feedback was collated from four therapeutic training courses (29 respondents). Written informal feedback sent to the project lead via e-mail was provided to the evaluation team. Marketing statistics were taken from the project’s final report to Adoption England.

Findings

¹⁷ Cheshire East, Manchester, Salford, Stockport and Trafford

¹⁸ Cheshire West and Chester, Halton, St Helens, Warrington and Wigan

¹⁹ Liverpool, Knowsley, Sefton and Wirral

²⁰ Oldham, Bolton, Bury, Blackburn with Darwen, Rochdale and Tameside

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

- A change in project staff changed the focus of the project. The initial plan to run an attachment focused course for carers could not be implemented as a specifically trained project worker was made redundant. Instead, a two-day therapeutic training course was developed (implemented in April 2023). Originally aimed specifically at prospective EP carers, it was subsequently offered to all prospective adopters due to low numbers. 72 prospective adoptive families attended this training between April 2023 and March 2025. Thirty-seven of these included EP in their approval offer.
- The new project lead drew on their skillset to develop several creative and user-friendly resources for professionals and EP carers which became one of the main outputs of the project, alongside the training, even though it was not originally what the project set out to achieve.
- The changing adoption landscape i.e. fewer available adopters also impacted project aims and delivery.
- The project team reported challenges with covering such a wide area, with 20 local authorities, all of whom had different approaches to EP. Participation levels were variable across agencies, and the VAAs did not expand to recruit EP carers for older children as expected.
- The implementation of EP champions was successful in some areas, particularly where an existing network could be drawn upon, but LAs who had other priorities were unable to commit the time needed to make changes.
- Keeping a referral database and tracking children proved difficult due to the project lead not being kept up to date by social workers regarding whether children had been placed in EP and whether prospective adopters had taken a child via EP.
- Staff turnover in children's teams impacted knowledge retention.
- With resources being made available on the Adoption England website, some concern was raised as to whether these were being utilised by children's social workers in particular. Concerns were also raised about the duplication of effort in producing resources across projects.

How the project affected EP practice and outcomes

- Three older children benefitted from being placed with EP carers across the duration of the project. Due to problems in data tracking, there were reported difficulties in gathering accurate numbers.
- The newsletter was reported to keep professionals updated and provide a key point of engagement.
- Feedback from professionals on the resources produced suggest that they have practical applicability and will be well used in EP practice.
- Feedback on the therapeutic training course was very positive overall and indicated that prospective adopters received an improved preparation experience, with them being better equipped to parent an adopted child. The majority of those who completed feedback (21 of 29, 72%) reported an increase in their understanding and

confidence of therapeutic parenting and relevant parenting techniques for older children.

- The two marketing campaigns led to a significant increase in engagement on adoption in general, and it was reported that some RAAs saw an increase in enquiries. Data were not available to confirm this, or to indicate whether these enquiries led to an increase in EP carers for older children. An unexpected benefit was that collaborative working on the marketing project created relationships which people hoped would continue in the future.
- While the plan was for the therapeutic training to continue, the delivery and co-ordination of this needed further consideration, given that the EP lead would no longer have ringfenced time to undertake this work.

Key learning from implementation

While the initial aim of the project was not achieved (to increase the number of older children placed with EP carers), the project was reported to see other successes such as the development of well received therapeutic training for prospective adopters which benefitted prospective adopters/EP carers and children. The project also raised the profile of EP for older children, created a legacy of resources on EP and saw an increase in networking across the region.

Northwest (Family Time)

The project covered four RAAs – Adoption Counts²¹, Together for Adoption²², Adoption in Merseyside²³, Adopt Lancashire and Blackpool and Adoption Now²⁴, as well as four VAAs (Adoption Matters, Caritas Care, Nugent and Barnardo’s). The project was led by VAA Caritas Care, who had significant experience of facilitating and supporting family time in EP.

Project overview

The aim of the project was to further develop an established good practice model of supporting and facilitating family time in Early Permanence, devised by the Northwest Concurrent Planning Service. In the Northwest, the facilitation of family time in EP moved from the Concurrent Planning Service to the local authority, and the service noticed a shift in how well this was facilitated and managed. The service therefore looked to share their knowledge to help local authorities to improve practice as well as children’s, parent’s and carers’ experience of family time.

There were two activity strands to the project:

- Develop practice guidance for Family Time Workers supporting contact in EP, with the inclusion of birth parent voice.
- Develop and deliver a training package across local authority family centres to support their facilitation of contact sessions.

Methods

Interviews were undertaken with the project lead (service manager) and one project worker (a social work assistant). Attempts were made to gather feedback from one of the local authorities who received the training, but no response was received. Viewing figures from the Adoption England web page hosting the practice guidance were provided by the national team.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

Practice guidance was produced as intended, but this took much longer to write than initially planned. Birth parent voice was not reflected as strongly as hoped as there were

²¹ Cheshire East, Manchester, Salford, Stockport and Trafford

²² Cheshire West and Chester, Halton, St Helens, Warrington and Wigan

²³ Liverpool, Knowsley, Sefton and Wirral

²⁴ Oldham, Bolton, Bury, Blackburn with Darwen, Rochdale and Tameside

limited research/publications available to draw on (and it was not within the scope of the project funding to seek the views of parents specifically for the guidance).

It is noteworthy that the guidance produced is extremely comprehensive, which covers many aspects of family time practice, but the length of the document may be off-putting to read for practitioners who have limited time for practice development.

Regarding the training offer, there were significant changes to the original scope of this. Training was delivered to approximately 45 family time supervisors across two local authorities over four sessions. It was initially planned that this training would be rolled out pan-regionally but due to challenges with getting local authorities on board, the team developed a training package that local authorities could deliver themselves (i.e. train the trainer style). The pack comprised of a video, slides and accompanying notes. At the time of writing, these had not yet been made available nationally and had not been seen by the evaluation team. Challenges identified relating to this aspect of the project included:

- not having contact details for family time centre/workers and managers meant it was difficult to get details about training filtered down to them.
- there was a poor take up of training, and those that did attend were not necessarily best placed to implement change.

The delays in finalising resources were reportedly due to:

- Difficulties in managing additional work alongside day-to-day roles.
- Responsibility for the practice guidance changed hands within the team due to a lack of confidence in writing this.
- A self-identified lack of skills and knowledge required to create more interactive training.
- The lead agency was going through a time of change.

How the project impacted EP practice and outcomes

This project has unfortunately had relatively limited impact on EP practice due to the challenges outlined above. However, for those who attended the initial training, feedback was positive. Some of the knowledge shared may have been put into practice by family time supervisors, but there were limitations on what supervisors could do due to constraints with their time and lack of seniority. There would likely have been more impact if the training was also delivered to senior managers who had more scope to implement practice changes.

The practice guidance does not appear to have been disseminated to a wide audience. The Communications and Marketing Officer for Adoption England reported that the webpage that hosts the Good Practice Guide was viewed a total of 227 times over a 10-month period up to June 2025. It can be assumed that not all views would be by practitioners. This is a very low number when considering how many professionals this guidance would

be relevant to and suggests that it has not been well publicised and/or may be difficult to find on the Adoption England website.

Interviews with the project team further identified how the training put family time in EP on the radar of family time professionals, and face to face training encouraged discussions around best practice in family time. It was suggested by the team, however, that this new knowledge was likely to be lost due to staff turnover.

Key learning from implementation

This project was difficult to evaluate due to a lack of feedback on the resources that had been produced but the project clearly faced challenges in delivering its original aims. The project highlighted the impact that delivery of training could have in terms of starting discussions about changing and improving an area of practice but identified that training needs to be pitched to the right audience who have the means to make changes. The development of tools such as practice guidance and training materials may be better developed and disseminated at a national rather than local level, to extend the audience but also to draw on a bigger pool of skills and knowledge.

South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC)

The South West Adoption Consortium was established in 2000 and continued after regional agencies were formed. SWAC covers three RAAs – Adoption West (covering five LAs²⁵), Adopt South West (five LAs²⁶) and Aspire (four LAs²⁷), and three VAAs – Barnardo’s, CCS Adoption and PACT. The host RAA was Adoption West.

Project overview

The VAA CCS previously received funding for EP development in 2015. This was reported to lead to more people considering EP in the South West area, but it was felt practice had slipped and required revitalisation. The aim was to create a model that was sustainable in the longer term.

Activities included:

- Employment of a project lead for 12 months.
- Development of EP documents/templates to be used across all RAAs.
- EP Conference (April 2023).
- Creation of an emotional wellbeing checklist to help recognise the impact of uncertainty for carers (for adoption SWs to use).
- Implementation of EP champions in every LA/RAA, with regular champions’ workshops.
- Development of EP resources (leaflets etc.).
- Review of the training offer for EP carers and implementation of new training.
- Practice development related to family time and use of EP for older children/siblings.
- Identification of where EP practice has ‘slipped’ since previous improvements.

Methods

Interviews undertaken with the RAA leads from Adopt West and Adoption South West. EP data were provided by both these RAAs. We were unable to collect any feedback from Aspire due to a change in RAA leadership. Four feedback forms were completed by EP carers.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

- Pan-regional collaboration was challenging due to changes in senior leadership in two of the RAAs. Therefore, the project felt very Adoption West driven and focused.

²⁵ South Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, North Somerset and Bath & North East Somerset.

²⁶ Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Devon, Plymouth, Torbay and Somerset.

²⁷ Dorset, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.

- The emotional wellbeing checklist was developed but its use in practice had not been sustained.
- Template and resources were developed, but again further work was needed to embed their use in practice.
- EP carer training was reviewed during the project and changes were implemented in some areas. The training has again been changed (extended) since the end of the project – so EP training is now mandatory training. The changes were only recently implemented; no feedback is available.
- Champions were not attending meetings regularly and if they were, were not in a position to drive change.
- We did not get any feedback on the development of family time practice or EP for older children.

How the project impacted EP practice and outcomes

- Having a lead with a sole focus on EP helped to drive change.
- The number of EP referrals were reported to be relatively high during the project. It was reported by the RAA leads that an increase in social workers' and wider stakeholders' consideration of EP has been sustained.
- The number of children placed in EP increased in Adoption West, particularly in the year the project received funding, increasing from 22 in 2021/22 to 36 in 2022/23 (from 22.9% to 46.2% of all children placed for adoption respectively). Adopt South West also placed more children in EP (36 in 2022/23, 56 in 2023/24 and 50 in 2024/25). The greater numbers of children placed in EP meant that demands to support such placements also increased, putting strain on the system.
- Adoption West saw a subsequent drop in the percentage of children placed EP as a proportion of all those adopted – 28.6% in 2023/24 and 23.1% in 2024/25.
- There were challenges in increasing numbers of adopters willing to consider EP. Over the last two years, fewer EP carers as a proportion of overall adopters have been approved in Adoption West, though this has not been seen in other areas in the South West. Projects felt wider problems with adopter sufficiency had had an impact, plus higher numbers of reunifications may have put off some potential EP adopters.
- As with other projects, there were challenges with data collection, and concerns about the accuracy of Coram-i reported data.
- Previous EP carers who completed feedback indicated that Adoption West influenced their decision to become EP carers, particularly through training and social worker encouragement, although this feedback reflects only a small sample of four carers and may not represent wider views.
- Three out of four EP carers agreed that the training prepared them for the EP/foster carer role but one did not. Given the timescales, it is likely that these carers undertook training before the most recent revision.
- More resources were created for both practitioners and EP carers to better inform them of what EP is. All four EP carers who provided feedback identified that resources were very or somewhat influential in their decision to pursue EP. One carer suggested resources for older children in the family would be helpful.

- A new cohort of social workers in adoption recruitment and assessment teams since the project ended has meant that some learning has been lost.
- The EP conference was very well received. All who gave feedback rated the overall impression of the event and the content as very good or good, as well as it being extremely/very useful for understanding the legal framework of EP.
- It has been difficult to keep the momentum going without funding and a dedicated project worker, though the host RAA has created a senior practitioner role who takes a lead in EP, dealing with referrals and EP development.
- Having several funded projects across the RAAs has meant that the focus has since been lost somewhat on EP.
- EP placements are longer, complexity is higher with more uncertainty and carers need access to high levels of support. One of the reports written by the EP lead notes the need for therapeutic support for EP carers in high stress situations.

Key learning from implementation

This project achieved some of its goals particularly in terms of more children being placed in EP. The project had broad aims across a large geographical area which may have affected the extent of change that could be achieved. Since the project, Adoption West and Adoption South West received the CoramBAAF quality mark for EP, utilising a lot of the information from the project in that application.

Midlands Together Collaboration

Midlands Together (MTC) is a collaboration of RAAs and VAAs in the East and West Midlands, made up of five RAAs²⁸ and three (initially two) VAAs.²⁹ Between the RAAs, 18 local authorities were covered, including large urban areas with diverse populations and more rural areas. MTC is not a formal entity, it has no budget or formal leadership structure.

Project overview

The project aimed to ensure that more children in need of permanence had the opportunity to be placed with EP carers, as EP was quite well established in some RAAs but not others. This involved reviewing current regional practices to develop a business case for EP and subsequently embedding a Midlands model into practice with a focus on ensuring sustainability of change and progress.

Another strand (not included in this evaluation) was a cost/benefit analysis undertaken in collaboration with the Rees Centre at Oxford University (Trivedi et al., 2023). Their report highlights that EP is less costly than the traditional adoption route from foster care (between 25% and 32% depending on whether interagency fees are paid). This is a finding which is relevant not only to Adoption England but to the Department for Education when considering future funding for EP practice development.

Activities included:

- Production of a good practice guide in EP and associated training event.
- Training for professionals, including the development of a suite of training materials and a training course on EP for LA social workers.
- Development of an 'EP Action Planning tool' for auditing EP in each LA.
- Identification of EP champions in each agency.
- Set up of EP champions across the region and quarterly meetings.
- A four-month programme of drop-in surgeries to influence current practice.
- Meeting with CAFCASS and the Judiciary to promote EP.
- Review of EP carer training (used to be standalone but integrated earlier on into the preparation training programme).
- Establishment of an ongoing, simple data set for EP.
- Implementation of a review form for when EP ends in reunification to ensure EP was appropriate in the first place.

²⁸ Adoption at Heart, Adopt Central England, Together4Children, Adoption East Midlands and Birmingham Children's Trust

²⁹ Adoption Focus and Barnardo's

Methods

The only data we were able to collect from this project was through a brief interview with an RAA manager, with additional information gathered from governance group meeting minutes and a final project report.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

- The EP practice guide was produced and the training event to launch this was attended by approximately 250-300 practitioners. The guide was reported by the RAA manager to be a useful resource to steer for best practice going forward.
- Embedding EP champions was a 'bit of a slow burner' as it took some time to find the right people in the right place in the organisation to undertake this role.
- The audit tool (known as the 'EP Action Planning Tool' was produced but it was unclear whether this was being used.
- Data tracking for EP was successful and filled in at the end of each quarter by each RAA/VAA. Having one person (RAA leader) take ownership of helped to ensure it was completed. Agencies who had a dedicated data analyst found reporting data more straightforward.
- An element of data collection felt to be missing was a way of collating information on why EP doesn't proceed to adoption and whether it was the right decision for the child in the first place.
- A partnership existed between several of the RAAs and VAAs involved in the project, with an established governance group. Established relationships were utilised and built upon which was beneficial in terms of the success of the collaboration.
- The motivation to change was dependent on each agency's starting point.
- Risk aversion of some professionals in some, but not all, agencies impacted EP numbers.
- One challenge identified was trying to keep EP 'live' and this was something that continued to be a challenge for the service without an EP project lead.

How the project impacted EP practice and outcomes

- The number of children placed in an EP placement increased by 10%, from 15% of all children placed in 21/22 to 25% in 22/23.
- The limited numbers of prospective adopters, and their availability has been a challenge and there have been missed opportunities to place children identified as suitable for EP with EP carers because of this.
- An increase in collaboration across the region was reported to lead to more consistency in EP practice.
- There is now a better overview of how EP is used with the collation of accurate data.

Key learning from implementation

We could only collect very limited data on this project. The manager interviewed reported several positive outcomes but highlighted the need to now sustain these.

Adopt Thames Valley

Adopt Thames Valley (ATV) is a regional adoption agency (RAA) that was established in 2017. It is a partnership of seven local authorities³⁰, hosted by Oxfordshire County Council.

Project overview

Funding was used to expand an existing adoption buddy scheme (delivered by an external provider), to train experienced EP carers as EP buddies. A peer support group was previously piloted but wasn't successful, therefore this expansion of the buddy scheme was proposed.

The scheme provider offers initial training and monthly supervisions for EP adopters to provide peer support to EP carers at any stage in their EP journey. The training is based on a skills model which includes learning about listening, reflecting, summarising, clarifying and noticing positive aspects of a conversation. Buddies and recipients are matched carefully. Buddy recipients are offered 12 x 1 hour buddy sessions but can access more if required with no limit.

Methods

Interviews were undertaken with the RAA service manager, two project co-ordinators, one EP buddy recipient and three EP buddies.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

- The planned project activities were all achieved. 10 EP buddies were trained, with 9 remaining in this role. 23 EP carers were provided with a buddy across the course of the project.
- Building on an established and successful scheme worked well and ensured a smooth implementation process.

How the project impacted EP practice

- People were keen to join the scheme to train as buddies. This was reported to be due to having good trainers and training and offering a lot in terms of emotional support and becoming part of the 'buddy family'.
- Key motivations for buddies were having had a positive experience of having a buddy themselves and wanting to give back or not having had this opportunity but wishing that it had been available.

³⁰ Bracknell Forest Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Council, Reading Borough Council, Swindon Borough Council, West Berkshire Council, London Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham Borough Council

- Buddies were generous with their time in supporting EP carers. However, they could sometimes find it difficult to juggle work, parenting younger children and being a buddy.
- Buddies valued getting support system for themselves through the scheme – “people go in thinking they will give but they also receive support through their own crises” (EP buddy).
- The team regularly got positive feedback on the benefits of buddies for both EP carers and buddies themselves.
- Professionals felt that EP carers who had a buddy seemed more able to manage uncertainty.
- Having an external provider was beneficial in taking a task away from the RAA and having confidence in the expertise of those running the scheme. It was felt if this was offered by the RAA, the support would be ‘diluted’.
- EP carers were often supporting the child’s family time alongside parenting so could find it difficult to slot buddy sessions in.
- The project found it difficult to get feedback from recipients through forms. However, the feedback they got directly from buddy recipients was positive.
- The team believed that having continuity of the same buddy, with some commonalities, worked well.
- The buddy recipient who was interviewed provided feedback about the aspects of the scheme they found helpful. They appreciated the one-to-one support as they lacked confidence to join a peer support group. Although they did not have a specific need for a buddy (their EP placement had progressed smoothly), they enjoyed working with the buddy and found it helpful to have someone to talk to. They appreciated the parallel experiences they had shared in their journey to adoption. The main limitation was carving out time to meet with the buddy when they were very busy with other commitments.

Key learning from implementation

This was a project with a specific focus which built on an existing successful initiative. Findings indicate that perhaps unexpectedly, the buddy scheme was extremely valuable not only to those who received it, but also to the EP buddies who benefited from training and support themselves. It worked well for recipients who prefer a 1:1 relationship over group support and having access to unlimited sessions allowed for a relationship to develop and grow.

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