
Evaluation of Adoption England's Matching Grants Programme

Final report

April 2026

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This report was produced by the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia and the Institute of Public Care at Oxford Brookes University, and funded by Adoption England. The views presented in this work are those of the authors and may not be shared by Adoption England or regional adoption agencies.

How to cite this report: Turnpenny, A. & Neil, E. (2026) *Evaluation of Adoption England's Matching Grants Programme: final report*. Oxford: Institute of Public Care, Oxford Brookes University.

Executive summary

Background

Matching in adoption is a critical process to secure legal, residential, and relational permanence for children. In recent decades, matching has shifted towards a needs-based approach, emphasising the child's specific requirements and the adoptive parents' capacity to meet them, with necessary support.

Existing research identifies key factors influencing matching outcomes as agency practices, proactive family finding, and the quality of information shared. Robust and timely assessment of both children's needs and adopters' capacities is essential to capture the complexity of risk and resilience in children's development, and to identify a strong match to lay the foundations for a stable family.

The regionalisation of adoption agencies aimed to streamline processes and expand the pool of prospective adopters. While some improvements in timeliness and collaboration have been noted, challenges remain in recruiting diverse adopters and achieving timely matching for children often described as 'harder to place' due to specific characteristics (e.g. older age) or needs (e.g. long-term condition, disabilities). Evaluations suggest that organisational practices, targeted recruitment, and enhanced support offers are key to improving the quality and equity of matching.

Adoption England launched the Matching Grants Programme in 2022. As part of the programme, regional adoption agencies (RAAs) and their partnerships were able to apply for funding to implement projects that aimed to improve matching systems, processes, and practice at local, regional, or national level.

Eleven projects received funding to implement a wide variety of activities to improve matching systems and practice between September 2022 and May 2025.

Evaluation methods

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

The evaluation began in December 2023, focusing primarily on ongoing projects. Ethical approval was secured via Oxford Brookes University's Research Ethics Committee.

Interviews with project teams and wider project stakeholders were undertaken between April 2024 and March 2025. The final report draws together stakeholders' experiences of implementation and perceptions on effectiveness and impact based on 42 semi-structured

interviews with professionals from eight of the 11 projects. Project reports (quarterly and final reports submitted to Adoption England) were reviewed when available.

Key findings

The projects funded by the Matching Grants Programme were diverse in scope and size, and addressed the whole spectrum of family-finding and matching activities.

Activities implemented by the projects

The activities across the projects fell under two main headings: **working with prospective adopters** and **improving systems, collaborations, and staffing capacity**. Examples of specific activities implemented by the projects include:

- Employing dedicated coordinators to facilitate more joined-up working and relationship building across RAAs and VAAs, including regional collaboration.
- Adapting the family-finding process to offer enhanced family finding or earlier identification/planning for children likely to wait longest for adoption.
- Aligning practice across RAAs to foster regional collaboration.
- Establishing multidisciplinary formulations – a shared understanding of risks, needs, or difficulties to create a working hypothesis about what can or should be done – for family finders and children's social workers to better understand children's needs (including sibling assessments).
- Training and professional development opportunities for practitioners to improve assessment, family finding, and matching practice.
- Using data and algorithms to improve the efficiency of matching practice.
- Tailoring recruitment and family-finding campaigns for specific children.
- Creating informative and attractive profiles for children waiting to be adopted.
- Organising exchange events and activity days.
- Delivering targeted outreach, training, and preparation for prospective adopters considering the adoption of children with specific characteristics (e.g. siblings).
- Helping adopters understand the child's characteristics and what these might mean for day-to-day parenting, now and in the future.
- Supporting the introduction and the transition period before the child first moves into an adoptive family, including through peer support.

Project outcomes

Stakeholders across all the projects identified a range of positive outcomes associated with the activities undertaken. From the perspective of benefits to **children**, several key improvements were attributed to the projects. For example:

- Earlier identification of children who are likely to wait longer or need additional resources was supported by enhanced family finding and information exchange activities.

- The use of profile booklets as part of family finding helped generate interest and engagement from prospective adopters.

Several projects noted significant improvements in permanency planning and family finding. Improvements in the quality of children's profiles were also highlighted.

From the perspective of benefits to **prospective adopters**, stakeholders reported that:

- Training and information sessions, delivered during preparation or as supplementary support, encouraged adopters to consider children with a wider range of characteristics and additional needs.
- Multidisciplinary and clinical psychology input, either at events or during introduction, was well received and highly valued.

From the **practitioner perspective**:

- Stakeholders highlighted that activities involving multidisciplinary formulations contributed to increased practitioner confidence and creativity in family finding and matching.
- Project activities also contributed to stronger and more formalised working relationships and partnerships across RAAs, VAAs, and local authorities.

Lessons from implementation

The evaluation found that projects were delivered in full and largely aligned with their original aims. Several projects demonstrated flexibility and made adaptations in response to emerging needs, insights gained during implementation, or operational realities (e.g. staff turnover). These adaptations were enabled by supportive and flexible programme management from Adoption England.

Key contextual factors that impacted the implementation of projects included increasingly acute adopter shortages alongside a growing share of children with complex needs coming through for adoption.

The implementation of projects also coincided with intense resource pressures on staff capacity, which placed demands on project teams to maintain engagement with project activities.

The relatively short timeframe of the Matching Grants Programme constrained some of the long-term ambitions and activities planned by project teams.

Sustainability emerged as a key concern among stakeholders. While targeted, short-term funding helped drive partnership working and/or innovation, some stakeholders raised questions about the long-term viability and sustainability of new practices. Some of the projects and activities were not sustained after the funding ended.

Stakeholders identified several key factors that contributed to effective project delivery and implementation:

- A common lesson across projects was the need for clearer guidance at the outset and a more focused project scope to support planning and delivery.
- Full-time (senior) leadership with protected time (and resources) was seen as critical to support effective and timely project delivery and provide the necessary strategic oversight.
- Securing engagement – both from managers and practitioners – from the beginning was highlighted as essential.
- The ability to adapt project scope and delivery flexibly in response to emerging needs or contextual changes was seen as a key enabler of success.
- Allowing sufficient time for new approaches to become embedded in routine practice was seen as essential for long-term impact.
- Thinking about and planning for sustainability from the outset were identified as critical for future programmes.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Matching Grants Programme generated valuable learning around specific innovations and promising practice improvements. Based on this, the report puts forward several recommendations:

- **Embedding efficient agency processes as standard practice.** Our evaluation highlighted two practices that RAAs can implement, without significant additional costs, that have the potential to improve outcomes for children and prospective adopters: (1) earlier working with adopters to improve their understanding of the needs of the children waiting and their confidence to adopt children who might be considered harder to place, and (2) earlier tracking of children in the adoption process and offering targeted and intensive family finding early in the process for those likely to wait the longest.
- **Further funding and development of specialist assessment and support services at the matching stage.** The value of having access to specialist multidisciplinary support during family finding and matching has been highlighted for both adopters and professionals in various projects and should be considered for further testing and roll-out. The value of multidisciplinary support assessment at the matching stage will be maximised if it can secure the right support for the family after adoption.
- **Thinking beyond the match – supporting transitions.** The role of multidisciplinary support services in helping plan and support children's transitions was also evident in some projects and merits wider development.
- **Building the evidence base of peer support services.** The value of helping adopters better understand the needs of specific children and offering enhanced support across the matching process, including through peer support, has been highlighted in the evaluation and could be considered for further testing.

- **Continued support for pan-regional network building and practice development activities.** The evaluation also highlighted the importance and potential benefits of closer collaboration and networking across RAAs and VAAs to increase opportunities for matching, particularly in times of adopter shortage or for children with specific characteristics.
- **Wider initiatives to recruit more adopters are needed.** Focusing on matching with prospective adopters already in the system has inherent limitations. Child-specific recruitment is promising, and the projects funded by the Matching Grants Programme offer useful lessons for future implementation. The targeted recruitment of underrepresented adopters and addressing the ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in adoption remain priorities.
- **A robust strategy for innovation in matching practice with targeted investment.** The Matching Grants Programme demonstrated the value of focused, targeted investment in practice; however, in some cases, innovations or new activities were not sustained once funding ended. Future support for innovation should offer a clear pipeline with a longer-term view to scaling up and embedding effective practices.

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Background	3
2.1. Matching and achieving permanence for children	3
2.2. Key factors that help and hinder family finding and matching	4
2.3. Matching children of ethnic minority backgrounds	6
2.4. Assessing children's needs and adopters' capacities	7
2.5. Adopter-led matching	8
2.6. Regionalisation of adoption agencies and its impact on matching	9
2.7. Summary	10
3. Evaluation approach and methods	12
4. Summary findings	15
4.1. Overarching theory of change and activities across all projects	15
4.2. Implementation and feasibility	16
4.3. Impact	18
4.4. Key learning	19
5. Conclusions and recommendations	21
6. References	24
Appendix 1: Interview topic guides	27
Appendix 2: Overarching programme theory of change	29
Appendix 3: Project snapshots	30
Adopt Coast to Coast: Child-specific recruitment for children who are likely to wait longer	31
Adopt East Midlands (Midlands Together Collaboration): A dedicated regional lead to maximise matching within the collaboration	35
Adopt London East (Adopt London): Implementation of activities to match more children within the collaboration	38
Adopt Thames Valley: A multidisciplinary matching hub to improve matching for children with additional needs	43
Adoption Connects: A dedicated matching lead to coordinate and improve matching opportunities for priority children	46
Adoption Partnership South East: Advanced family finding, including sibling assessments and enhanced matching for sibling groups	49

Coram RAA: Intensive family finding for priority children, and an outreach ambassador to support the recruitment of adopters from Black ethnic backgrounds	52
Coram-i: An algorithm-based collective matching tool for family finding	56

1. Introduction

Adoption England launched the Matching Grants Programme in 2022. As part of the programme, regional adoption agencies (RAAs) and their partnerships were able to apply for funding to implement projects that aimed to improve matching systems, processes, and practice at local, regional, or national level.

RAA leaders identified the specific aims of the programme **for children** as:

- Improved and speedier permanency opportunities through early, consistent, and accurate assessment of matching and placement needs.
- Greater placement stability through earlier placement and better understanding of children's support needs.
- Earlier attachments, reducing impacts of trauma and loss, and improving life outcomes.
- Providing the best possible permanency opportunity for all children in the system by ensuring those likely to wait longer are identified earlier and family-finding plans put in place.
- Reducing delay for children by diversifying the regional pool of adopters.

For **adoptive families**, the programme set out to achieve:

- Increased equality of opportunity in finding the right match through coordinated national family finding (adds value to regional approaches to matching for children who wait longer).
- Confidence to come forward to adopt due to greater transparency within the system.
- More timely matching and placement, leading to earlier attachments.
- Adopters more aware of the needs of children waiting and better prepared to meet those needs.
- Greater placement stability from tailored, informed adoption support packages secured at the point of placement.

Eleven projects received funding to implement a wide variety of activities to improve matching systems and practice between September 2022 and May 2025.

Adoption England commissioned an evaluation partnership from the University of East Anglia and the Institute of Public Care, Oxford Brookes University, to explore how matching grants were implemented and early evidence of impact.

The evaluation was designed to generate high-level evidence, specifically to explore feasibility, stakeholders' perspectives on impact, and key learning. This report is not intended to present data on project activities, such as participant numbers and the number of children matched – the projects submitted information on this in their 'end of grant' reports – or to assess the effectiveness of funded interventions compared to 'business as usual' family finding.

An interim report presented in December 2024 put forward an overarching theory of change and identified key categories of matching activities implemented by the projects (these can be found in [Section 4.1](#) of this report).

This final report draws together stakeholders' experiences of implementation and perceptions on effectiveness and impact based on 42 semi-structured interviews with professionals – practitioners from RAAs and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs), and senior RAA leaders – from eight of the 11 projects.¹

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 provides a brief overview of the literature on matching, highlighting existing evidence on what works and gaps in family finding for an increasingly diverse group of children.
- Section 3 briefly outlines our evaluation approach and methods.
- Section 4 synthesises findings across projects focusing on the three main areas: implementation and feasibility, impact, and learning.
- Section 5 draws conclusions and offers recommendations to inform the design and delivery of future grant programmes.
- Appendix 3 presents a snapshot of each project that summarises its aims, implementation, impact, and key learning based on stakeholders' insights.

¹ Of the three remaining projects, two projects worked with other evaluation partners and were not included in our evaluation to avoid duplication. One project ended by the time the evaluation started, and no stakeholder interviews could be completed.

2. Background

2.1. Matching and achieving permanence for children

Permanence for children is defined as “a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging” (DfE, 2021, p. 19–20). Adoption is one of several options that can be considered to achieve permanence for children.

Permanence has been considered to consist of *legal permanence* (in adoption, the child becomes legally a member of their adoptive family, while the state, in the form of the local authority, ceases to legally be a ‘parent’), *residential permanence* (placement stability), and *relational permanence* (the child and parents have a reciprocal relational attachment/bond and members of the family feel they belong to each other) (Palacios et al., 2019).

In an overview of the role of adoption in child protection, the success of adoption in providing permanency is underlined, but five factors are highlighted as important in achieving good outcomes for children and families (Palacios et al., 2019):

- Minimising delay and adversity before adoption.
- Adoptive parent capacities, motivation, resilience, and commitment.
- Placement: adopters and children need good information, preparation, and support.
- Well-resourced and accessible pre- and post-adoption services.
- Contact, openness, and transparency.

Adoption England's strategy, launched in 2024, aligns with the areas outlined above, with its focus on:

- recruiting, preparing, and supporting adopters from diverse communities to meet children's needs,
- maintaining children's relationships with people important to them,
- matching and placing children in a timely way, and
- providing adopted people and their families with tailored help and support (Adoption England, 2024).

Activities related to matching cut across all these areas of focus and are key in achieving permanence for children.

Matching in adoption was originally concerned with physical resemblance between the child and the adoptive parents (often linked to secrecy and the minimisation of ‘differences’ in adoption), alongside ideas about placing children with the ‘ideal’ family, defined in traditional and conservative terms that focused on demographics such as marital status, employment, and income stability (Hanna & McRoy, 2011).

In contemporary adoption, however, matching has shifted to focus on:

- the identification of the needs of the child,
- the assessment of the capacity of prospective adoptive parents to meet the child's specific needs,
- processes to consider how to identify the best fit between the child's needs and the capacities of prospective adopters,
- and, crucially, a consideration of what pre- and post-placement support the family will need (Hanna & McRoy, 2011).

Governmental reforms of the adoption system carried out over the past 10 to 15 years have had a strong focus on achieving timely permanence for children through reducing delays in the system. Changes have included:

- speeding up the assessment of prospective adopters,
- encouraging the use of early permanence,
- introducing 'scorecards' to track local authority timescales in assessing adopters and placing children,
- removing the requirement to aim to place children from ethnic minority groups with adopters from the same ethnic background,
- broadening the support for families, including via the Adoption Support Fund (now the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund), and
- regionalising adoption agencies.

The impact of regionalisation on matching is discussed in [Section 2.6](#).

2.2. Key factors that help and hinder family finding and matching

The seminal study on linking and matching in the UK was carried out between 2006 and 2010, after the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act in 2002 (Farmer et al., 2010; Farmer & Dance, 2016). This study included 149 children with an adoption recommendation, including 67 cases that were followed in real time until six months after the adoption placement. The sample overrepresented children from harder-to-place groups. There was a focus in the research group on differences in agency practices related to matching and an examination of how many matches were made and whether these were considered to be good-quality matches.

Most children (73%) were matched with prospective adopters. For the just over one quarter (27%) who were not matched by the end of the study, the majority had their plans changed to long-term foster care, while others were still waiting for a match. Where children were not matched, in a substantial minority of cases, a lack of proactive work to find a match was a feature of the case.

While most matches were considered to be good (73%), just over a quarter involved either some compromise or serious compromise in terms of either the child's matching requirements or the 'stretching' of adopters' preferences. When the match was considered

to be poor, the majority of placements had either disrupted or were not going well after the child's placement, indicating the importance of considering not just timeliness but also the quality of that match.

The reasons why children's needs were compromised included not being able to find a family who could adopt all members of a sibling group, and the prioritisation of one need over another (e.g. finding a family who could meet the child's medical needs could be given priority over meeting the child's ethnicity needs). Indeed, ethnicity was the need most often compromised on. In terms of adopters' preferences, some people were placed with children who did not meet their expressed preferences, particularly around attachment difficulties, history of mental illness and the birth family, and developmental uncertainty.

Agency practices that were seen to relate to **delays and poorer matches** included:

- A preference for matching children in-house rather than exploring a wider pool of prospective adopters.
- Not involving the adoption team at an early enough stage (the lack of experience of adoption of children's social workers was noted as something that could potentially affect their judgement of what makes a good match).
- Delay caused by a lack of proactive family-finding work, alongside looking for an 'ideal' family and rejecting other potential adopters who could be suitable.
- A lack of proactive work to family-find for ethnic minority children, including a willingness to explore interagency placements and a realistic balancing of the importance of ethnic matching when children had additional needs, such as severe developmental problems.

Good-quality and timely matches were facilitated by the following **agency practices**:

- Speedy and comprehensive information on the child, including recent and engaging photographs.
- Making early decisions about widening the search, including agreeing funding for external searching, additional profiling activities, or family-finding events – in some cases, however, people were concerned about the costs of interagency placements, or the difficulty of supporting these.
- Using formal processes to track and review cases through the system, e.g. planning meetings and deadlines.
- Using formal matching meetings and feedback from adoption panels in determining a match, as opposed to matching children informally.

The reluctance of agencies to look beyond their own pool of prospective adopters in matching children is echoed strongly in a study which explored the impact of the short-lived government subsidy of the interagency fee (Dance et al., 2017). This subsidy was introduced to encourage agencies to use interagency placements when these could provide a good match for children from hard-to-place groups. The rationale for this was that, despite evidence that interagency placements are not actually more expensive than

in-house placements (Selwyn et al., 2009), agencies might still be deterred from looking beyond their own borders because of the need to pay an interagency fee. The study found that professionals identified wide-ranging reasons why they may prefer in-house placements, including issues around trust and collaboration between agencies, and the ability to support placements when children are placed a distance away.

The study by Dance et al. (2017) took place at a time when there was an excess of adoptive parents compared to children. The speed of matches did increase during this period, but participants did not necessarily attribute this to the subsidy of the interagency fee. They felt it was due more to having a larger pool of adopters to choose from. Some also reported that they had made organisational changes to speed up matching that were effective, such as tracking children from an earlier stage. Despite the generous pool of prospective adopters to choose from at the point this study was undertaken, some children remained very hard to find a family for, underlining again the need to focus not just on the number of adopters, but also adopters' willingness and capacity to adopt children with additional needs.

2.3. Matching children of ethnic minority backgrounds

Concerns about children from ethnic minority groups being disadvantaged in terms of their likelihood of being adopted are long-standing, but achieving adoption for ethnic minority children through transracial placement with White parents has long attracted controversy (Barn & Kirton, 2012). Racial disproportionality in adoption is not a simple picture, and it is important to disaggregate different ethnic groups (Selwyn et al., 2010; Barn & Kirton, 2012). For example, children of mixed parentage have similar pathways to White children, while Black and some Asian children have lower rates of adoption and slower pathways to adoption (Selwyn et al., 2010).

Government policy around ethnic matching in adoption shifted somewhat in the Children and Families Act 2014 with the removal of the requirement to give "due consideration" to a child's religious persuasion, racial origin, and cultural and linguistic background when placing a child for adoption. This measure was designed to prevent ethnic minority children being passed over for adoption due to lack of an ethnically matched family. In practice, however, it is still widely considered to be important to match children with parents who can meet their ethnic identity needs, including preparing them to manage racism, be this in ethnically matched or transracial placements. Hence, it is important to consider matching issues for this group of children. Selwyn and colleagues' study of the pathways to permanence for Black, mixed ethnicity, and Asian children made several recommendations, including:

- Targeted recruitment of adopters from ethnic minority backgrounds and mixed relationships, particularly those willing to consider children with additional needs.
- Increasing the national pool of suitable adopters and being willing to match children with prospective adopters from outside of the agency's local area.

- Improving the assessment of children to provide a deeper understanding of their background, e.g. looking at migration histories of parents; considering ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage, as well as focusing on the child's current experience.

Some current practice initiatives designed to improve matching opportunities for ethnic minority children include the [AFDiT framework](#) (Anti-racist Framework for Decision-making in Transitioning children from minoritised racial and ethnic groups into transracial adoptive families) and the Adopt London [Black Adoption Project](#), which is exploring and addressing barriers to recruitment of Black, mixed-Black heritage people, and mixed-Black relationship couples in adoption.

2.4. Assessing children's needs and adopters' capacities

Key to preventing disruption in adoption is the accurate assessment and exploration of children's needs and prospective adopters' capacity to meet those needs (Hanna & McRoy, 2011; Rennolds et al., 2025). A careful assessment of children's needs is essential to help prospective adopters understand what broad terms such as 'autism', 'developmental delay', or 'attachment difficulties' might mean in day-to-day parenting. This includes not only the period immediately after adoption but also thinking about what children may need as they enter adolescence or even adulthood (Dance et al., 2017; Murphy, 2025). This is a complex area of work because, although factors such as maltreatment, genetic risk, and in-utero harm are broadly associated with poorer outcomes for adopted children, the relationship between these factors and individual outcomes is neither straightforward nor predictable (Woolgar, 2016).

Insights from prospective adopters who had undertaken their preparation and assessment in the newly created RAAs (Selwyn & Lewis, 2020) shed some light on the challenges of changing adopter preferences. Although preparation increased adopters' understanding and acceptance of adversity, and fostered greater flexibility around some issues, including birth family contact, willingness to consider children with additional needs changed little. The greatest shift was in willingness to consider a child who had attachment difficulties. Openness to adopting sibling groups increased somewhat, but preferences for adopting younger children remained strong, and there was no increased willingness to consider disabled children, children of different ethnicity, or children whose parents had learning difficulties.

Case formulations are increasingly used to support the assessment of children's needs and adopters' capacities in matching. They involve a collaborative and often multidisciplinary process to develop a shared understanding of risks, needs, or difficulties, and to create a working hypothesis about what can or should be done. Such 'personalised risk formulations' are vital to help professionals and prospective adopters move away from simplistic assumptions that exposure to a certain risk factor will inevitably lead to a certain negative outcome (Woolgar, 2016). Children's exposure to risks will vary, even within the same family; genetic risks are often unpredictable or unknown; and children are differently susceptible to risk (Woolgar, 2016). Instead, information and guidance about children's

needs given to prospective adopters should be *“based on a clearer understanding of the evidence than [sic] simplistic approach of the damage done - be that damage to attachment processes, the developing brain or whatever other processes might be invoked”* (Woolgar, 2016, p. 32).

Multidisciplinary formulations of children's needs are required that capture the complexity of risk and resilience in children's lives. There is a need to be open and honest with prospective adopters about difficulties children may have, but this needs to be balanced with discussion of the benefits of how positive parenting can improve children's life chances. There also needs to be an individualised formulation of children's support needs, as well as supporting adoptive parents to understand how these needs may change over time (Woolgar, 2016). This is skilled work that requires creating a safe space for both professionals and prospective adopters to consider the match, allowing for the tolerance of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety alongside hopes and expectations for the future (Simmonds, 2016, p. 58).

Multidisciplinary case formulations are also important in terms of planning and meeting post-adoption support needs of families. A useful example is the Adopting Together service in Wales: a multidisciplinary team lead a 'team around the child' assessment meeting. Following the child's placement, in the first 12 months, a clinical psychologist leads three consultation meetings which support adopters to revisit information gained at the initial assessment meeting and discuss their current feelings and the child's progress. This continuation of the multidisciplinary formation of the child's needs held at the matching stage being followed by post-placement support was seen as normalising adopters' expectations of receiving support and facilitating the exploration of early intervention (Shelton et al., 2020).

The use of tools in carrying out personalised assessments in adoption matching is considered to be useful in an overview of seven assessment tools developed in the United States, though the poor evidence base for the effectiveness of these tools was highlighted (Hanna & McRoy, 2011). The Strengths and Risks Matching Tool for Adoption (STAR) is an example of a matching tool recently developed in the United Kingdom (McGuire-Snieckus, 2023).

2.5. Adopter-led matching

Adopter-led matching refers to proactive and participatory approaches in which prospective adopters take an active role in identifying potential matches with children awaiting adoption. The [National Practice Standards for Matching](#) state that *“prospective adopters are supported to undertake self-led linking through various family finding activities”* (Standard 5.5). Adopter-led matching activities include activity days, family-finding events, and exchange days, and the use of online platforms such as Link Maker.

Activity days are designed to help adopters to 'see the child first', enabling them to identify potential matches based on real-life interaction (e.g. play) and encouraging reflection on their preferences based on information about the needs of children awaiting adoption.

Exchange events are held without children being present and provide opportunities for adoption agencies to profile specific children to prospective adopters.

The evidence base relating to adopter-led matching activities is emerging, although there are some positive findings related to activity days reported by Coram (2021) and the Scottish Government (Robinson, 2016). A recent evaluation by the Institute of Public Care (Simpson et al., 2024) also found evidence that activity days and similar events are associated with positive outcomes. Specifically:

- The events create opportunities for linking and matching for children considered harder to place.
- Social workers, foster carers, and prospective adopters tend to find these events helpful and positive.
- The events help to broaden adopters' perspectives about the characteristics of any children they would like to adopt. This is thought to contribute to additional matches beyond the events themselves.
- No adverse effects of participation at these events were reported for children or prospective adopters.

2.6. Regionalisation of adoption agencies and its impact on matching

The regionalisation of adoption services between 2017 and 2020 aimed to address delays in placing children, shortages of adopters – particularly for children considered harder to place – and weaknesses in adoption support services. It was envisaged that by pooling resources and budgets, RAAs would achieve efficiencies, improve matching through access to a larger adopter pool, and support professional development through greater specialisation (Blades et al., 2019).

The roll-out of RAAs was evaluated through a national evaluation that ran from 2018 to 2022 (Blades et al., 2019; Ecorys UK & the Rees Centre, 2020, 2022). The evaluation tracked early implementation through to more established operation.

The first evaluation (Blades et al., 2019) of early-adopter RAA sites highlighted substantial pre-existing variation between agencies in how quickly children were being placed with an adoptive family. By early 2019, the newly established RAAs generally perceived that regionalisation had increased the size of the adopter pool, especially benefitting smaller unitary local authorities. Evidence on whether placements were becoming quicker was mixed, and concerns about matching harder-to-place children persisted. Nevertheless, stakeholders identified several practices linked to improved matching, including enhanced tracking systems, quicker access to a wider adopter pool, specialist family-finding roles, and earlier involvement of adoption teams in care planning.

The second (interim) report (Ecorys UK & the Rees Centre, 2020) identified clearer improvements. Established RAAs were placing children more quickly and increasingly within the RAA's own area. Dedicated family-finding teams, improved monitoring, early permanence planning, and more inclusive recruitment strategies were mentioned as

contributors. Stakeholders perceived some improvement in adopter sufficiency and diversity, though confidence about the latter was limited. Challenges remained, however, for older children and sibling groups. Echoing the findings of Dance et al. (2017), some practitioners and managers also expressed concerns that quicker is not always better when it comes to matching.

The third and final report (Ecorys UK & the Rees Centre, 2022) identified practitioner strategies that were seen as helpful for matching. These included:

- Targeted community outreach to attract diverse prospective adopters.
- Highlighting support offers during recruitment.
- Focusing on varied motivations to adopt and exploring openness to adopting children with different characteristics at an early stage in the process.
- The use of case studies to showcase successful adoption stories of children who are considered harder to place.
- Themed information sessions.

The report also noted improved recruitment following the Covid-19 pandemic, but adopter diversity remained low. This was described as a national issue. However, the report also identified that some adopters willing to adopt harder-to-place children were matched with children who had less complex needs, suggesting challenges in matching decision-making rather than solely adopter supply.

Despite pandemic-related disruptions, children placed through RAAs were adopted somewhat faster than those placed by local authorities. Organisational practices, such as monthly strategic matching meetings, were felt to be helpful alongside developing tools to assist in matching, such as information material for adopters about children who wait longest and early sharing of profiles of children who are harder to place. Persistent reluctance around interagency placements was also highlighted.

2.7. Summary

Permanence in adoption encompasses legal, residential, and relational stability, and matching is a critical process in securing these outcomes. Historically rooted in physical resemblance and demographic ideals, matching has shifted towards a needs-based approach, emphasising the child's specific requirements and the adoptive parents' capacity to meet them, with necessary support.

Key factors influencing matching outcomes include various agency practices, such as proactive family finding, the quality and timeliness of information shared, clear processes, and a framework to track cases and manage family finding. Robust and timely assessment of children's needs and adopters' capacities is essential, requiring nuanced, multidisciplinary approaches that move beyond simplistic risk models to capture the complexity of risk and resilience in children's development.

The regionalisation of adoption agencies aimed to streamline processes and expand the pool of prospective adopters. While some improvements in timeliness and collaboration have been noted, challenges remain in recruiting diverse adopters and ensuring matches reflect the full spectrum of children's needs. Evaluations suggest that organisational practices, targeted recruitment, and enhanced support offers are key to improving matching quality and equity.

3. Evaluation approach and methods

Using a qualitative approach, this evaluation explores professional stakeholders' insights and views on the implementation and (emerging) impact of projects funded by the Matching Grants Programme.

The evaluation started in December 2023, by which time all projects were underway and some were nearing completion (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of the matching projects

Lead	Project summary
Adopt Coast to Coast	Implement child-specific recruitment for children who are likely to wait longer.
Adopt East Midlands (Midlands Together Collaboration)	Appoint a dedicated regional lead to maximise matching within the Midlands Together Collaboration.
Adopt London East (Adopt London)	Appoint a matching manager and a matching coordinator to implement a wide range of activities to match more children within Adopt London.
Adopt Thames Valley	Create a multidisciplinary matching hub to improve matching for children with additional needs.
Adoption Connects	Appoint a dedicated matching lead to coordinate and improve matching opportunities for priority children.
Adoption Now	Appoint a dedicated matching lead for the North West region to coordinate various matching workstreams.
Adoption Partnership South East	Implement advanced family finding, including sibling assessments and enhanced matching for sibling groups.
Adoption West	Improve permanence and matching for children with disabilities, increase understanding of permanence planning for children with disabilities and complex needs, and pilot a family-finding approach.
Coram RAA	Implement a programme of intensive family finding for priority children and employ an outreach ambassador to support the recruitment of adopters from Black ethnic backgrounds.

Coram-I	Develop and test an algorithm-based collective matching tool for family finding.
One Adoption West Yorkshire	Trial the use of the FLAG tool to identify children who wait longer, and implement a child-focused family building service.

The evaluation consisted of the following key activities:

- Ethical approval was obtained from Oxford Brookes University's Research Ethics Committee in January 2024.
- Project teams were invited to take part in an initial online meeting between January and February 2024 to provide background information and share their progress on implementation. A theory of change was subsequently completed for most projects.
- Projects were offered support with the refinement of their data capture frameworks and tools. However, opportunities for timely input were limited due to a time lag between project initiation and the start of the evaluation.
- Quarterly 'check-in' meetings were held with projects to update on implementation.
- Interviews with project teams and wider project stakeholders were undertaken between April 2024 and March 2025. A total of 42 semi-structured interviews were completed (see Appendix 1 for interview topic guides).
- Interviews were conducted online, audio-recorded, and transcribed using automatic transcription features available within Teams and Zoom. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by the researcher who conducted the interview.
- Interview transcripts were thematically summarised using the following questions, based on the evaluation's objectives, as the organising framework:
 - How was the project implemented? Was it feasible?
 - How did the project impact matching and family finding? What worked well or less well?
 - What do stakeholders see as the key learning?

The evaluation had some limitations:

- The use of stakeholders' insights on implementation and views on impact as our main source of evidence was a pragmatic decision associated with both the diversity of projects/activities and the practical limitations of data capture due to the time lag between project initiation and the start of the evaluation, as well as the absence of suitable secondary data sources to triangulate our findings.
- Three of the 11 projects were not included in the evaluation. Adoption West and One Adoption West Yorkshire had independent evaluation partners and were not included to avoid duplication. Adoption Now's project ended when this evaluation started and no stakeholders could be interviewed.

- The number of stakeholder interviews conducted varied across the eight projects included in this evaluation, from just one to nine. This may have impacted the richness of data and depth of insight into implementation. Although for most projects we interviewed multiple stakeholders, we cannot be certain that the views captured in the evaluation are aligned with other stakeholders' experiences in the project, i.e. those who did not engage with the evaluation.
- Engagement was variable across the projects. This was partly associated with the timing of the evaluation, which started when all projects were underway and some were nearing completion.

4. Summary findings

4.1. Overarching theory of change and activities across all projects

The projects funded by the Matching Grants Programme were diverse in their scope and size, and addressed the whole spectrum of family-finding and matching activities. Based on individual project information and Theory of Change Frameworks, an overarching theory of change for matching and family finding was created to summarise the key challenges, the proposed solutions and activities, and the expected outcomes across the projects (Appendix 2).

A snapshot report of each project in this evaluation is provided in Appendix 3. 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, the perceived impact on matching, and any implementation challenges.

This section summarises key findings across the projects.

The activities across the projects fell under two main headings: (1) working with prospective adopters, and (2) improving systems, collaborations, and staffing capacity.

4.1.1. Activities targeting prospective adopters

All but one project's activities primarily targeted (prospective) adopters to ensure that more children with different needs and characteristics could be matched. Within the project activities were those that:

- Showcased children with different needs and characteristics waiting to be adopted through the creation of informative and attractive profiles or the organisation of events, such as exchange and activity days (Adopt London, Adoption Connects, Adoption West, Midlands Together Collaboration).
- Designed and ran tailored recruitment and family-finding campaigns for children who had not been matched through standard approaches (Adopt Coast to Coast, One Adoption West Yorkshire).
- Built prospective adopters' confidence and willingness to consider adoption, including the adoption of children with different needs and characteristics, through targeted outreach, training, and preparation (Adopt Thames Valley, Adoption Connects, Adoption Partnership South East, Coram RAA).
- Supported prospective adopters to make informed decisions about children with additional needs (including sibling groups) by helping them understand the child's characteristics and what they might mean for day-to-day parenting, both now and in the future (Adopt London, Adopt Thames Valley, Adoption Partnership South East).
- Supported the introduction and the transition period before the child first moved into an adoptive family, including through peer support (Adopt London, Adopt Thames Valley, Adoption Partnership South East).

4.1.2. Activities to improve system and staff capacity

Nearly all (9 out of 11) projects implemented activities to improve system and staff capacity for family finding and matching. Activities included:

- Appointing dedicated coordinators to facilitate more joined-up working and relationship building across RAAs and VAAs, including regional collaboration (e.g. Adopt London, Adoption Connects, Midlands Together Collaboration).
- Making adaptations to the family-finding process to offer enhanced family finding or earlier identification/planning for children likely to wait longest (e.g. Adoption Connects, Coram RAA).
- Collating and distributing information – such as profile booklets – about waiting children or adopters (e.g. Adopt London, Adoption Connects, Midlands Together Collaboration).
- Aligning practice across RAAs to foster regional collaboration (e.g. Adopt London, Midlands Together Collaboration).
- Supporting family finders and children's social workers to better understand children's needs (including sibling assessments), implications for day-to-day parenting, and how prospective adopters can be supported to meet these (e.g. Adopt London, Adopt Thames Valley, Adoption Partnership South East).
- Training and professional development opportunities for practitioners to improve assessment, family finding, and matching practice (e.g. Adopt London, Adopt Thames Valley, Adoption Partnership South East, Midlands Together Collaboration).
- Using data and algorithms to improve the efficiency of matching practice (Coram-I).

4.2. Implementation and feasibility

Overall, we found that projects were delivered in full and largely aligned with their original aims. Several projects demonstrated flexibility and made adaptations in response to emerging needs, insights gained during implementation, or operational realities (e.g. staff turnover). These adaptations were enabled by supportive and flexible programme management from Adoption England (see also [Section 4.4 on Key learning](#)).

4.2.1. Contextual factors

Project planning began in 2022, with core implementation taking place throughout 2023 and 2024. Planning largely coincided with significant transformation across RAAs, many of which were still relatively newly established. In some cases, priorities and needs shifted from those outlined in initial proposals, necessitating adaptations in delivery.

Children's services were also undergoing 'post-Covid recovery', marked by an increase in the number of children approved for adoption, including those with more complex needs and sibling groups.

At the same time, the sector was facing a growing shortage of adopters, with some geographic areas and sociodemographic groups more acutely affected (e.g. prospective

adopters from the global majority). This is frequently linked to the cost-of-living crisis and 'lifestyle changes' post-Covid, although similar concerns had been raised prior to the pandemic (see [Section 2.3](#)).

4.2.2. Resources

The increasing need to family-find for children with more complex needs, including sibling groups, had significant implications for staff workload. Prioritising these cases placed additional pressure on teams and, in some instances, affected staff capacity, morale, and sustained engagement and buy-in with project activities.

Staff recruitment challenges were a recurring theme, especially in securing senior practitioners for fixed-term roles. Efforts to draw on internal expertise through secondments, transfers, or temporary redeployments also presented difficulties, particularly in terms of managing existing workloads and maintaining service continuity, putting significant pressure on senior practitioners involved in implementation.

The projects also placed considerable demands on leadership, particularly heads of service. Their time and capacity were stretched by the need to support projects – not only matching projects but also often concurrently occurring innovations, such as early permanence – while continuing to oversee core service delivery.

4.2.3. Nature of activities

Some activities, particularly those involving relationship building and cross-agency collaboration, took longer to establish than originally anticipated. This was evident in some projects where network development and trust building required sustained engagement over time.

Projects involving data and information sharing frequently encountered delays due to legal or procedural complexities (e.g. data-sharing agreements). Initiatives with multiple delivery partners – RAAs, VAAs, and local authorities – also faced coordination challenges that could impact timelines and required additional communication and coordination.

Introducing innovation during a period of acute supply-side and organisational pressures (i.e. shortage of adopters) proved particularly difficult. In some cases, resistance to change or limited capacity within the system constrained the ability to implement new approaches effectively.

4.3. Impact

Stakeholders across all projects identified a range of positive outcomes associated with the activities undertaken.

From the perspective of benefits to **children**, several key improvements were attributed to the projects:

- Earlier identification of children who are likely to wait longer and need additional resources was supported by enhanced family finding (e.g. Coram RAA) and information exchange activities, such as network meetings (e.g. Adoption Connects, Midlands Together Collaboration).
- Profile booklets – implemented by projects led by, for example, Adopt London, Adoption Connects, and Midlands Together Collaboration – were seen as a valuable tool for showcasing children earlier in the adoption process, helping to generate interest and engagement from prospective adopters.
- Several projects noted substantial improvements in permanency planning and family finding. These included Adoption Partnership South East's roll-out of sibling assessments, Coram RAA's enhanced family finding, Adopt Thames Valley's multidisciplinary matching hub, and Adoption Connects' matching coordinator input, which were seen as contributing to more robust and bespoke planning.
- Improvements in the quality of children's profiles were also highlighted. More engaging descriptions using positive and child-centred language and high-quality imagery were considered helpful in supporting successful matching and family finding (e.g. Adopt London, Midlands Together Collaboration).

From the perspective of benefits to **prospective adopters**, stakeholders reported that:

- Training and information sessions, delivered during preparation or as supplementary support, encouraged adopters to consider children with a wider range of characteristics and additional needs.
- Multidisciplinary and clinical psychology input, either at events such as exchange and activity days (Adopt London) or during introduction (Adopt Thames Valley), was well received and highly valued.

From the **practitioner** perspective:

- Stakeholders highlighted that activities involving clinical psychology input (Adopt London, Adopt Thames Valley) or senior practitioner support (Adopt Thames Valley, Adoption Connects, Adoption Partnership South East, Coram RAA) contributed to increased practitioner confidence and creativity in family finding and matching, and improvements in professional knowledge and skills.
- Project activities also contributed to stronger and, in some cases, more formalised working relationships and partnerships across RAAs, VAAs, and local authorities (e.g. Adopt London, Adoption Connects, Midlands Together Collaboration).

- The Matching Grants Programme also generated valuable learning around specific innovations, demonstrating the feasibility and potential benefits of child-specific family recruitment (Adopt Coast to Coast, One Adoption West Yorkshire) and collective matching approaches (Coram-I).
- Promising practice improvements were also noted, such as changes to Adopt London's Stay & Play events (e.g. the introduction of 'soft matching' prior to events to ensure that all children and prospective adopters attending had at least one potential match) and Midlands Together Collaboration's Meet the Adopter events, which focused on approved adopters who had been waiting longer to be matched and identifying potential matches.

Sustainability emerged as a key concern among stakeholders.

- While targeted, short-term funding helped drive partnership working and/or innovation, some stakeholders raised questions about the long-term viability and sustainability of new practices. This was mentioned in relation to joint working and partnership networks, where limited resources and time constraints were frequently highlighted as barriers to sustaining progress. Some of the projects and activities were not sustained after the funding finished.
- Another sustainability challenge mentioned by stakeholders was staff turnover. High turnover rates risk the loss of skills and expertise developed through project activities, highlighting the need for ongoing investment (e.g. in training or practice leadership) to maintain and embed innovative practices over time.

4.4. Key learning

Participants identified several key factors that contributed to effective project delivery and implementation:

- A common lesson across projects was the need for clearer guidance at the outset and a more focused project scope to support planning and delivery.
- Projects with clearly defined aims and a focus on a specific, recognised area of need were more likely to achieve coherence and impact. Meanwhile, projects that were fragmented – involving diverse activities with multiple stakeholders – were more challenging to implement and to communicate/secure buy-in for.
- Full-time (senior) leadership with protected time (and resources) was seen as critical to support effective and timely project delivery and provide the necessary strategic oversight.
- Securing engagement – both from managers and practitioners – from the beginning was highlighted as essential. Projects that invested in early communication and building trust tended to experience stronger commitment.
- The ability to adapt project scope and delivery flexibly in response to emerging needs or contextual changes was a key enabler of success. The supportive role of Adoption England throughout the Matching Grants Programme was recognised and highly valued.

- Drawing on internal expertise and existing resources, including in some cases (e.g. Adopt Thames Valley, Adoption Partnership South East) synergies with the development of multidisciplinary adoption support teams, helped implement and embed new practices more effectively and support sustainability.
- Managing complexity (e.g. partnerships involving multiple RAAs and VAAs, particularly those without a history of collaboration) requires appropriate resources, including time and staff support, which need to be considered from the outset.
- Allowing sufficient time for new approaches to become embedded in routine practice was seen as essential for long-term impact.
- Thinking about and planning for sustainability from the outset were identified as a critical consideration for future programmes.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Our evaluation found that projects funded through the Matching Grants Programme implemented activities that broadly aligned with factors identified in the literature as important for achieving positive matches. Across the projects, there were numerous examples of promising practice that benefited children, adopters, and practitioners, while also contributing to the development of matching practice within RAAs. However, given the diversity of project aims and activities, success looked different across the projects.

Several projects focused on established practices known to support effective matching and permanence for children, as identified in the literature (e.g. Farmer & Dance, 2016). These activities included expanding the pool of potential adopters through pan-regional collaboration, initiating early and proactive family finding, tracking children's progress through the system, and using engaging photos and videos to support matching.

Other projects adopted more innovative approaches, particularly those involving multidisciplinary assessments and formulations to better understand children's needs, including decisions about sibling placements. The literature, including recent research focused on adoptive family experiences (e.g. Adoption UK, 2025), and the initial evaluation of the Adopting Together service in Wales that provides multidisciplinary support around matching and transitions (Shelton et al., 2020) underscores the importance of tailored, multidisciplinary support from the earliest stages of the adoption process. Some projects successfully demonstrated both the feasibility and value of these approaches from the perspective of practitioners. Crucially, practitioners envisaged benefits potentially extending into post-adoption support, broadening the focus of matching from simply identifying the right family to strengthening the resources and support available to families in the longer term.

Overall, the Matching Grants Programme generated several coherent models with potential to improve practice and outcomes for children with the most complex needs. It also fostered stronger collaboration, communication, and joint working, benefitting not only matching processes but also broader service delivery. In addition, the projects also generated valuable learning for established practices, particularly around exchange events and activity days, offering insights into how these can be refined and better targeted in the future. Producing high-quality profiles of children was seen as beneficial in achieving matches. As previous research suggests, photos and videos can 'bring the child to life' and may have additional benefits in preparing parents for the transition of the child into the family. In the longer term, they may also help children 'see a version of their past' (Grant & Lury, 2020).

The findings also highlight the importance of RAAs' readiness in enabling the uptake and embedding of innovation. Successful implementation depends not only on the availability and evidence base of new approaches or models but also on the presence of a supportive organisational culture and infrastructure, such as adopter and child data. Without these, innovations are less likely to be implemented or embedded.

Based on our findings, several recommendations can be made for future funding programmes and the development of matching practice:

- **Embedding efficient agency processes as standard practice.** Our evaluation highlighted two practices that RAAs can implement, without significant additional costs, that have the potential to improve outcomes for children and prospective adopters: (1) earlier working with adopters to improve their understanding of the needs of the children waiting and their confidence to adopt children who might be considered harder to place, and (2) earlier tracking of children in the adoption process and offering targeted and intensive family finding early in the process for those likely to wait the longest.
- **Further funding and development of specialist assessment and support services at the matching stage.** The literature presented in [Section 2](#) and experience from the Matching Grants Programme consistently highlight the challenges in family finding for certain children and the need for specialist approaches that involve better assessment and which help adopters and professionals manage uncertainty about children's developmental needs. The value of having access to specialist multidisciplinary support (e.g. clinical or educational psychology) during family finding and matching has been highlighted for both adopters and professionals in various projects (Adopt London, Adopt Thames Valley, Adoption Now) and should be considered for further testing and roll-out. The value of multidisciplinary assessment at the matching stage will be maximised if it translates into an effective support plan, with appropriate resources and services for the family after adoption. This has the potential to achieve relational and residential permanency for children through strengthening adoptive families.
- **Thinking beyond the match – supporting transitions.** The role of multidisciplinary support services in helping plan and support children's transitions was also evident in some projects and merits wider development. Finding a good 'match' for the child is vital but then the child's move to a new family holds risks as it involves the child's separation from their primary attachment figures (foster carers). Transitions should involve close collaboration between adopters and foster carers and be planned on a case-by-case basis, with the individual child's needs guiding the nature and pace (Beek et al., 2021). Multidisciplinary consultations can start to build relationships between foster carers and adopters and help guide this individualising of the transition (Shelton et al., 2020). Specialist assessment and support around matching could also usefully include building in therapeutic structured play sessions between children and adopters pre- and post-move to adoptive family (Shelton et al., 2020).
- **Building the evidence base of peer support services.** The value of helping adopters better understand the needs of specific children and offering enhanced support across the matching process, including through peer support, has been highlighted by various projects (e.g. Adoption Partnership South East) and could be considered for further testing.

- **Continued support for pan-regional network building and practice development activities.** The evaluation also highlighted the importance and potential benefits of closer collaboration and networking across RAAs and VAAs to increase opportunities for matching, particularly in times of adopter shortage or for children with specific characteristics. The role of additional/external funding to encourage collaboration and relationship building was emphasised by stakeholders and it is also underpinned by the literature. However, RAAs can also identify ways to foster closer collaboration without external funding, as highlighted by existing initiatives (e.g. Adopt London, Midlands Together Collaboration).
- **Wider initiatives to recruit more adopters are needed.** Focusing on matching with prospective adopters already in the system, however, does not address contextual factors, such as a general downturn in applications to adopt or the ethnic disparities noted in the literature. Child-specific recruitment holds promise of evidence and the funded projects have provided useful learning for future testing or scaling up. The targeted recruitment of underrepresented adopters and addressing the ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in adoption also remain priorities.
- **A robust strategy for innovation in matching practice with sustained funding and a clear scope and purpose.** The Matching Grants Programme demonstrated the value of focused, targeted investment in practice; however, in some cases, innovations or new activities were not sustained once funding ended. Future support for innovation should offer a clear pipeline, be of sufficient duration to achieve planned goals, and include robust evaluation from inception. A longer-term perspective is needed to enable learning to be disseminated and effective approaches to be scaled up and embedded into standard practice.

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Appendix 1: Interview topic guides

Project lead/project manager

How does the project fit into the broader context of the RAA/collaboration?

Over the project period, what were the main challenges for family finding/matching?
Did these change?

How does this project fit into this context?

What were the planned project activities originally?

How were these decided/identified?

To what extent have you been able to implement these?

What has changed and why?

What do you notice as the impact of the activities? What has changed/is starting to change as a result of the project? (examples)

- For children who are harder to place [probe: permanency opportunities, placement stability, early identification, proactive family finding]
- For adopters [probe: confidence, support, experience]
- For professionals [probe: skills, attitudes, networks]

What worked well and what were the challenges?

If you were doing this again, would you do anything differently? What?

What has been the impact of implementing the grant:

- on your role
- on the team/RAA?

How was it to work with Adoption England? Any messages/recommendations?

What are the plans going forward?

Sustainability: will any of this become part of the core offer? What / why / how?

Anything else that we haven't talked about but it's important to mention?

Other professionals

Tell me about your background and role in the RAA.

What have been the main challenges for family finding in the last 18–24 months?
(Did these change?)

How did this project support you in your role/family finding for children?

How was this different from what you were doing/the family-finding or matching practice before?

What has changed/is starting to change as a result of the project?

Can you think of examples where [project activity] benefited a child/adopter/social worker?

Can you think of one or more examples of how children got a successful match/permanency as a result of the project activities?

Can you think of one or more areas/examples where, despite your best efforts, the [project activity] did not achieve the desired impact?

To what extent and how (if at all) has the [project] affected your family-finding/matching practice? What has changed as a result? [Probe: methods and skills, thinking/attitudes/confidence, networks]

Will any of this become part of the family-finding/adoption practice? What / why / how?

Is there anything you would have liked support with (related to family finding or matching) but the project did not/could not offer it?

Anything else that we haven't talked about but it's important to mention?

Appendix 2: Overarching programme theory of change

Challenges	Activities	Short- and medium-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Adopters: - may not recognise the individual qualities of children - may lack confidence in their ability to support children's needs or worry they may not get enough support after adoption - can find it difficult to consider children who do not fit their set preferences. Professionals: - Family finding is intensive, skilled work; resources and processes available are not always adequate. - Some waiting adopters can be overlooked because they are not perceived as the "ideal family". Systems: - There are not enough people wanting to adopt, and some people are not coming forward due to structural barriers. - Available adopters do not match the needs of children who are waiting to be adopted.	Working with (prospective) adopters to ensure that more children/children with different needs and characteristics can be matched: - Support prospective adopters to consider children with different needs and characteristics. - Build prospective adopters' confidence and willingness to adopt children with different needs and characteristics. - Encourage people from diverse backgrounds to consider adoption. Improving systems and capacity to facilitate timely and effective matching: - Conduct robust assessment of children's needs, including sibling assessments. - Facilitate professional networks and exchange of information about waiting adopters/waiting children, including collaborations across regional adoption agencies (RAAs) and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs). - Start the family-finding process as early as possible. - Broaden the perspectives and preferences of social workers to consider a wider range of prospective adopters. - Upskill and train staff.	Children: - who are likely to wait longer for adoption are identified early, and additional resources are made available - have robust and bespoke family-finding plans - have their needs understood more fully. Adopters: - are more confident due to a better understanding of children's needs, development, and potential - are more willing to consider children with different characteristics and/or additional needs. Professionals: - feel more confident and better supported/resourced in family finding - have improved knowledge and skills to prepare plans and needs assessments, etc. - use family-finding activities that are targeted for children who are likely to wait longer. Systems: - There are stronger working relationships and partnerships within and between RAAs, VAAs, and local authorities.	Children achieve permanence without unnecessary delay. This means that: - Children are matched more quickly. - Children are matched with adopters who can meet their needs. - Children are less likely to have plans deviate from adoption because a suitable adopter cannot be identified. There are stronger working relationships and partnerships within and between RAAs, VAAs, and local authorities. There is a sustainable supply of adopters from diverse backgrounds. There is effective family-finding and matching practice.

Appendix 3: Project snapshots

Adopt Coast to Coast: Child-specific recruitment for children who are likely to wait longer

Adopt Coast to Coast is a regional adoption agency (RAA) in the North East of England, established in April 2021. Currently, Adopt Coast to Coast comprises two local authorities: Durham County Council and Sunderland City Council (Together for Children). Cumbria County Council was also part of the RAA and the project until March 2023.²

Project overview

Adopt Coast to Coast and the voluntary adoption agency (VAA) ARC Adoption North East set out to test a collaborative approach to bespoke family finding for children with additional needs. The proposal built on an existing partnership between the RAA and ARC Adoption North East.

The project funded a senior practitioner post at ARC Adoption North East and targeted recruitment campaigns to attract prospective adopters for specific children with complex needs, nominated by each local authority within the RAA.

Funding was requested for 12 months, and the project started in 2022.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four stakeholders involved in implementation: the RAA head of service, the business and marketing manager of ARC Adoption North East, and two members of staff in the children's adoption team in Cumbria.

Interviews took place between June and September 2024.

Findings

Feasibility: how was the project delivered?

Each local authority was invited to nominate one child or sibling group for the project. Children selected were those for whom traditional family finding had not been successful, often due to complex needs, sibling status, age, or a combination of these.

- Michael (his real name) from Cumbria was the first child to be profiled. Michael was four years old at the time of the campaign and had significant health and developmental needs.
- [From Durham, two sisters, aged six and four, were profiled.](#) The older sister has complex physical disabilities and health needs.

² From 1st April 2023, Cumbria County Council was replaced by two new unitary authorities: Cumberland Council and Westmoreland and Furness Council; they went on to establish Cumbria Adoption.

- The campaign in Sunderland did not launch because an internal match was found after the children (a sibling group of two) were identified.

ARC Adoption North East developed individual marketing campaigns for each child, including:

- dedicated web pages,
- videos and interviews with foster carers, and
- social media advertising and press releases.

The campaigns varied in visibility depending on permissions and concerns about exposure and safeguarding. [Michael's campaign](#) included his name and face with parental consent. [The sisters' campaign](#) used non-identifiable images.

Michael's campaign received some backlash from the wider public.

The referral/identification process was managed by each local authority, with marketing and initial enquiries managed by ARC Adoption North East.

Coordination/implementation challenges included:

- Children were identified by the local authority with no involvement of the VAA partner. There was limited consideration of campaign viability.
- Getting timely information about the children, particularly medical information in Michael's case, slowed down the campaign's launch.
- Coordination was required for scheduling filming and interviews.
- Differences in local authority readiness and resources. Local authority or RAA social workers were not always present during initial visits to prospective adopters, and this was seen as a missed opportunity. Due to the regional scope of the campaigns, some of these visits took place at a distance.

Outcomes: impact on family finding and matching

The main statistics from the two campaigns are summarised in Table 2. Michael's campaign ran for three months and generated 60 enquiries, but only one progressed to approval. Many enquiries came from potentially unsuitable individuals or did not respond to any communication from ARC Adoption North East. However, Michael's plan was later changed to long-term fostering due to a newly diagnosed rare genetic condition.

The sisters' campaign initially ran for two months, then it was paused. It recommenced at the end of July 2024 for another six weeks, with new and improved images of the girls, a press release, and Facebook advertising that focused on Yorkshire and Lancashire, rather than the North East and Cumbria as it had done during the first two months. Despite many views and visits to the campaign page, only two additional enquiries were received in the second phase of the campaign. One of these was a serious enquiry from a couple and that was explored further.

The couple went on to complete their preparation and were approved at panel in summer 2025. The lack of a robust post-adoption support plan has been a major obstacle and a source of delay. The couple are still keen to be considered for the siblings, but this is dependent on the support plan, particularly around financial support, respite, and equipment.³

Table 2: Summary of the statistics from the campaigns

	Michael	Two sisters
Campaign page – Number of individual visitors	6k	3.25k
Number of enquiries	60	6 (4 + 2)
Number of initial visits	4	2 (1 + 1)
Number of registrations of interest	2 (1 specifically for Michael)	1
Duration of campaign	3 months	2 months + 6 weeks

Note: Campaign figures shared by ARC Adoption North East

Key learning

Participants shared a range of key learnings from the child-specific family-finding pilot. These related to operational, ethical, and strategic/policy considerations:

- Participants emphasised the need for better upfront planning, especially around timelines, roles, and expectations.
- Having all the information prepared in advance to minimise delays in campaign planning.
- Clear criteria to identify children who are suitable for this approach. Not all children are suitable for public-facing campaigns due to safeguarding or complexity of needs. This needs to be considered when identifying the children.
- The long-term implications of exposing children publicly need to be considered and justified. The risks – including backlash and reputational risk for VAAs and RAAs – need to be carefully considered against the potential benefits.

³ Last updated in October 2025.

- The process was more demanding and resource-intensive than anticipated, particularly in managing enquiries and coordinating with local authorities. The process also highlighted the challenges involved in converting initial enquiries and expressions of interest into registrations.
- In Michael's case in particular, despite the high volume of interest generated, very few expressions of interest were "serious", and only one resulted in a registration.
- Joint visits and collaboration between the VAA and local authority social workers were considered essential to the effectiveness of the campaign. However, these require additional resources and planning.
- There was consensus that child-specific recruitment has a role to play in family finding, but that it should be used selectively and possibly managed by specialist agencies.
- The project demonstrated that finding and matching families for children with special needs is only one part of the picture in securing a placement. Where children have significant additional needs, prospective adopters may also need reassurances about the provision of appropriate post-placement support and resources.

Adopt East Midlands (Midlands Together Collaboration): A dedicated regional lead to maximise matching within the collaboration

The Midlands Together Collaboration (MTC) is a group of regional adoption agencies (RAAs) and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) in the East and West Midlands, made up of five RAAs⁴ and three (initially two) VAAs.⁵ Between the RAAs, 18 local authorities are covered, including both large urban areas with diverse populations and more rural areas. MTC is not a formal entity and has no budget or formal leadership structure.

Project overview

The project led under MTC was designed to:

- Improve regional collaboration between the five RAAs and the VAAs that make up the partnership.
- Increase the number of children matched locally within the MTC region, reducing the need for placements far from a child's origin.
- Build trust and relationships among professionals across agencies to facilitate smoother cooperation in family finding and matching.
- Respond to changing adoption dynamics, particularly the decline in available adopters and the increasing complexity of adopter backgrounds and children's needs.

The key project activities were:

- Establishing and supporting a professional network through monthly meetings bringing together family finders and managers from different agencies.
- Creating shared tools and processes, such as a dedicated area on Link Maker for MTC agencies to share profiles, and a cooperative agreement to encourage RAAs to look locally first.
- Organising local profile exchange events and activity days, and attending national events to feature MTC children.
- Developing and distributing profile booklets featuring children who had been waiting the longest.
- Hosting practitioner development days, including training and practice-sharing sessions, to improve the quality and consistency of child profiling and matching practices.
- Facilitating early linking and matching through professional coordination and networking, including during stage 2 assessments.

⁴ Adoption at Heart, Adoption Central England, Together4Children, Adoption East Midlands and Birmingham Children's Trust

⁵ Adoption Focus and Barnardo's

Project implementation was supported by a small team of two project managers (practitioners, job share, 2–3 days a week).

Methods

The evaluators held monthly check-ins with the team and conducted six semi-structured interviews, including with the project lead, project managers, and family-finding managers from three partner agencies (two RAAs and a VAA).

Interviews took place between December 2024 and March 2025.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as planned?

Planned activities were implemented with minor adaptations responding to evolving needs and pressures:

- Monthly network meetings were established and became a core part of the project.
- Exchange events shifted the focus to adopters waiting longer. A new format was trialled towards the end of the project (from November 2024), focusing on waiting adopters. These events gave family finders the chance to hear directly from the waiting adopters' social workers.
- Practitioner development and training were combined with monthly meetings to reduce pressure on practitioners' time.
- Initial trust/relationship building took longer than expected. The project focused more on relationship building than originally envisaged, recognising its crucial role and demonstrating the value of collaboration.
- While early linking was encouraged throughout the project, there was recognition that not all RAAs were fully aligned with this approach.

How the project impacted family finding and matching

Stakeholders who were interviewed agreed that the project had a positive impact on family-finding and matching practice in several ways:

- The project helped to develop and consolidate a shared regional identity and strengthen collaboration.
- The project fostered trust, stronger working relationships, improved collaboration, and better communication between RAAs and VAAs.
- By prioritising regional matching and using the MTC project resources, more children were matched closer to home as a result of the networks and relationships built during the project. Smaller RAAs found the shared resources particularly helpful.
- The profile booklets and events helped raise the profile of children and adopters who had been waiting the longest.

- The project encouraged earlier conversations about matching, including during adopter assessments. This was described as particularly beneficial for children with specific characteristics, e.g. ethnicity.
- The project led to improvements in how children were presented to potential adopters – including profile writing and the use of media – and promoted greater consistency across RAAs.

Key learning from implementation

The importance of sufficient time, a clear strategy, and a commitment to engage with partners – especially those with no previous history of collaboration – emerged as a key lesson from implementation. Demonstrating the value of collaboration helps to break down barriers and move forward.

Adopt London East (Adopt London): Implementation of activities to match more children within the collaboration

Adopt London is a collaboration between four regional adoption agencies (RAAs): Adopt London North, Adopt London South, Adopt London East, and Adopt London West. Together, the RAAs cover 24 local authorities in London. Adopt London is a formal entity; it has its own budget and an executive board comprising RAA leads who oversee its operations and regular all-staff conferences.

Project overview

Adopt London's original proposal and ambition for the matching project included eight priority areas:

1. Strategic coordination and oversight
 - The appointment of a matching manager and a business support officer to coordinate matching activity across Adopt London.
 - A Project Board to track children waiting the longest.
2. Data and audit activities
 - To anticipate demand and gaps, regular audit of priority children likely to wait longest and of approved families and those in stage 1 and stage 2.
 - Through monthly profile booklets, maintaining awareness of all children and adopters waiting across Adopt London RAAs.
3. Early and proactive family finding
 - Family-finding plans prior to agency decision-making (ADM) and start of family finding at ADM decision point.
4. Support planning and better alignment across RAAs
 - Aligning support offers across RAAs, including support funded by the Adoption Support Fund.
 - Ensuring each child has a bespoke support package and an agreed support plan at the start of family finding.
 - Agreeing on a London-wide protocol for transition support packages.
5. Enhancing transitions and placement stability through a transition consultation clinic provided by a clinical psychologist; this was added to the project later.
 - Developing tools using the University of East Anglia model to support transitions and improve understanding among staff, foster carers, and adopters.

6. Engagement with prospective adopters and building confidence

- Designing and delivering training programmes across the four RAAs to boost adopters' confidence to consider children with greater/additional needs.
- Creating an educational/promotional video for recruiting and training adopters.
- Offering regular workshops and communication to maintain adopter interest and extend their offer.

7. Enhanced and coordinated family finding

- Exploring the use of Child Appreciation Days before linking families.
- Developing standard profiling tools and ensuring consistent use of platforms, such as Link Maker, across Adopt London.
- Holding regular profiling and activity events to engage adopters, increase matching opportunities for children with harder-to-place characteristics, and broaden adopters' preferences.

8. Systemic influence and advocacy

- Engaging with Cafcass and the judiciary to build confidence in adoption care planning for children with complex needs.
- Aiming to increase placement orders and make adoption a viable option for more children.

Implementation was supported by a small team comprising a project lead and a project coordinator (a business support role shared across the matching and early permanence projects). The matching grant also funded a clinical psychologist post to deliver the transition consultation clinic across the Adopt London RAAs.

Methods

The evaluators held monthly check-ins with the project coordinator between November 2024 and March 2025 to monitor implementation progress. They also conducted five semi-structured interviews with Adopt London staff, including the project lead, the project coordinator, the head of service from one of the Adopt London RAAs, and family finders from two RAAs.

Interviews took place in February and March 2025.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

The project experienced some disruption during implementation, which was attributed to several factors:

- Initial lack of clarity regarding project scope and leadership led to delays and inefficiencies.
- Low adopter participation affected some events (e.g. a small number of Stay & Play events were cancelled).
- Practitioner workload and inconsistent engagement: for some practitioners, balancing project responsibilities alongside substantive roles proved unsustainable. This resulted in inconsistent engagement from RAAs and practitioners, especially early in the project.

Following the appointment of a new project lead, some activities were suspended (e.g. coffee mornings and profiling events), while new activities started (e.g. the development of practice guides and Child Appreciation Days). Other ongoing activities were revised to improve their effectiveness.

Implementation was refocused on the following key activities:

- Stay & Play (family-finding) events, held quarterly at London Zoo, continued in a revised format.
- Monthly profile booklets, produced using standardised templates for children's and adopters' profiles, were distributed across Adopt London RAAs.
- Clinical support continued through the transition consultation clinic, hosted by a clinical psychologist.
- Practice guidance was developed to align practice across Adopt London. The new project lead set out to develop more than 18 documents, including procedures, templates, myth-busting guides, and transition plans.
- Regular meetings were held between team managers across RAAs to share practice and align processes.

How the project/activities impacted matching and family-finding practice

Four key activities were identified by stakeholders as contributing to matching and family-finding practice in Adopt London: quarterly Stay & Play events, transition consultations, Adopt London profile booklets, and practice guides.

Stay & Play events were widely regarded as “successful” by stakeholders in three key respects: they provided a positive experience for participants (based on feedback collected after the events), helped adopters better understand the needs of children waiting for adoption, and led to specific links and matches.

The new project lead introduced some changes to how the Stay & Play events were run to improve their effectiveness. Although these changes happened relatively late in the project – towards the end of 2024 – those involved in their implementation considered them promising. The changes included:

- Introducing 'soft matching' prior to Stay & Play events to ensure that all children present had at least one potential match.
- Opening the events to voluntary adoption agencies.
- Sharing a limited profile with adopters before the event to encourage them to focus on the child.
- Limiting the number of adults present at an event to provide a more relaxed atmosphere for the children.
- Encouraging foster carers to lead conversations about the children "because foster carers know how to bring these children to life".

Transition consultation/clinical psychology input was also regarded positively across all interviews. The key areas of impact were identified as:

- Enhanced transition planning by helping practitioners tailor transition plans to the specific needs of children, especially those with neurodiversity.
- Consultations and practical advice supported practitioners' confidence in managing complex transitions involving children with additional emotional and developmental needs.
- Giving space to consider emotions and maintain focus on the needs of the child.
- Improved outcomes for children and adopters: various examples were shared when clinical psychology input contributed to "smoother" transitions.

Profile booklets with children and adopter profiles that had a standardised format were also considered effective by stakeholders. There was consensus that the booklets helped initiate matches and broadened awareness of children and adopters waiting across Adopt London.

The **development of practice guides and templates** was the primary focus of the new project lead. The vision behind shared practice guides is that they will result in more consistent practice, increased collaboration across London RAAs, and a stronger collective identity. However, they were produced late in the project; therefore, the evaluation could not explore how they were used and their impact on practice.

Sustainability was a key concern raised in stakeholder interviews, also reflecting the relatively late-onset momentum in the project. Staff conferences and manager meetings are planned to continue to maintain momentum and support implementation, particularly embedding the use of practice guides and templates developed in the project.

There is also a strong desire for continued clinical support and joint Stay & Play events; these activities, however, are constrained by the availability of funding. Profile booklets will continue but will be produced and shared separately by each Adopt London RAA.

Key learning from implementation

The need for clearer initial guidance and a focused project scope emerged as a key lesson from implementation, alongside a dedicated full-time leadership with protected time.

The importance of improved buy-in strategies to engage practitioners and managers from the outset was also emphasised.

Adopt Thames Valley: A multidisciplinary matching hub to improve matching for children with additional needs

Adopt Thames Valley (ATV) is a regional adoption agency (RAA) established in 2017. It is a partnership of seven local authorities,⁶ with Oxfordshire County Council acting as the host authority.

Project overview

With funding from Adoption England's Matching Grants Programme, ATV established a multidisciplinary matching hub (MMH) to support the adoption of children with additional needs. The MMH comprised a senior social worker (0.5 FTE), a clinical psychologist (0.2 FTE), and an educational psychologist (0.2 FTE). All were seconded from an existing post within ATV or Oxfordshire County Council.

The project responded to two interrelated challenges:

- Children to be placed increasingly have specialist and complex needs that are often not clear or fully understood at the family-finding and matching stage. This creates uncertainty for professionals and prospective adopters, which can lead to negative outcomes (e.g. delays and disruption).
- Adoption is not simply about finding a family for these children, but about finding a 'specialised family' who can meet the children's needs. Adoptive families often require ongoing support. Planning for or putting in place this support should occur at an earlier stage to ensure the best outcomes for children and parents.

The MMH offered two main types of support for family finding/matching:

- Multidisciplinary formulation meetings to reflect on the child's needs and strengths, and to steer family-finding activities.
- Consultation meetings about specific questions related to the support needs of the child and their prospective adopters.

Additionally, the MMH:

- worked with schools and other settings to meaningfully involve them in introductions and the transition to adoption,
- offered direct observation of children in their home or educational setting to provide a detailed and up-to-date picture of a child's development where needed for the matching process, and

⁶ Bracknell Forest Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Reading Borough Council, Swindon Borough Council, West Berkshire Council, London Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham Borough Council

- developed training and resources on topics that adopters and professionals often find challenging, such as managing aggression and adopting children with a history of sexual abuse. The training was integrated into the existing monthly training offer, but the topics were newly developed by the MMH.

The project started in April 2023.

Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with nine ATV staff, including the RAA lead, the service manager, two MMH staff, and five family-finding social workers and team leaders. Interviews took place between December 2024 and January 2025.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

Over a period of approximately 18 months (until November 2024), the MMH supported 46 children. The project was implemented as planned, with relatively minor changes that evolved organically as implementation progressed:

- The project originally had a manager. When the manager left, it was decided that they would not be replaced because the MMH was flexible and responsive with a smaller team.
- The MMH initially offered drop-in sessions for practitioners but there was limited demand, so it offered pre-arranged consultations/formulation meetings instead.
- The MMH started offering short-term supportive check-ins for adopters while longer-term multidisciplinary support was being set up.
- As awareness of the MMH increased, the team began to be invited to matching and other planning meetings that involved children with particularly complex presentations/needs.

How the project impacted matching/family-finding practice

The stakeholders who were interviewed agreed that the MMH had a positive impact on family-finding and matching practice in a number of ways:

- Enhanced practitioners' confidence by providing time and space to reflect on the children's needs and how these might translate into family finding and matching.
- Encouraged practitioners to be more systemic rather than procedural and reflect (holistically) on potential matches rather than 'risk assess'. This helped practitioners to accept and communicate uncertainty.
- Enhanced practitioners' professional skills and broadened their perspectives by objectively challenging entrenched assumptions about 'impossible to parent' or 'very complex' children.

- Provided specialist knowledge about attachment styles, emotional regulation, resilience, and related areas.
- Contributed to improved communication and more robust intra-agency professional relationships/collaboration by offering a neutral and professional service and through fostering a better understanding of each other's roles as well as a more systemic and longitudinal perspective on the adoption process.
- Offered a reflective space to resolve (professional) trauma and supported professionals to draw out the learning, including from disruption. This might also help to prevent further disruptions.

Key learning from implementation

Participants identified several key factors that contributed to effective project delivery, as well as key learning for similar projects:

- Having both clinical and educational psychology input was central to the model, as was the ability to respond flexibly to demand.
- A formalised operating model and identity – created early on – were seen as helpful for engaging practitioners from the RAA and beyond (e.g. local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies).
- The MMH needs to be embedded with regular management oversight, although it is not necessarily straightforward to identify where it could sit within an RAA.
- Even though implementation was timely with a stable project team, the overall timescale still felt constrained and left limited time to embed and consolidate practice.

Adoption Connects: A dedicated matching lead to coordinate and improve matching opportunities for priority children

This project was implemented as a partnership between Adoption Connects and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Adoption.

Formed in 2019, Adoption Connects is a regional adoption agency (RAA) made up of two local authorities: Central Bedfordshire Council and Milton Keynes City Council. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Adoption is a hosted RAA established in 2020.

Project overview

Adoption Connects appointed a full-time matching lead to support family finding for priority children; that is, children with harder-to-place characteristics, including sibling groups. This was a new role created for the project for a fixed term of 33 months. The matching lead was recruited externally.

The role of the matching lead included:

- Working closely with family-finding team managers to proactively identify priority children with a plan for adoption (at the ADM stage).
- Supporting family-finding social workers in identifying in-house links and developing tailored plans for extended or national searching, including more effective use of Link Maker (e.g. updating profiles) and attending national family-finding events, including activity days.
- Developing and organising local activity days and other events for priority children.
- Creating robust, targeted adoption support assessments that draw on in-house, local authority, and Adoption Support Fund (ASF)-funded support to ensure a smooth transition for adopted children.
- Developing and formalising partnership working between the two RAAs and local voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) to share children's and adopters' profiles in a timely way. In practice, this meant monthly tracking meetings.
- Working with adoption charities (Adoption UK and CATCH) to review and co-produce in-house training for prospective adopters to improve their skills and abilities to consider priority children.⁷

The project started in April 2023.

Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with eight staff, including the two RAA leads, the project lead, three family finders from the RAAs, and two family link workers from two VAAs. Interviews were conducted between December 2024 and January 2025.

⁷ The project also purchased 25 Adoption UK passport memberships to support adopters of priority children.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

The project was delivered largely as planned despite the “challenge of the changing national picture of adoption”, which meant that some of the planned events could not take place due to a shortage of adopters.

The matching lead supported family finding for 49 priority children (20 from the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area and 29 from Milton Keynes and Central Bedfordshire).

How the project impacted matching/family-finding practice

Stakeholders identified various areas where the project made an impact:

- Stakeholders felt that bringing the RAAs and VAAs closer together resulted in more and speedier matches.
- VAA interviewees emphasised the positive impact of the strong working relationship and regular communication, how it helped them to have a deeper understanding of the children who are waiting to be adopted, and even prompted them to think about their strategic priorities and review how they prepare adopters.
- More proactive work was taking place with prospective adopters at stage 1 and stage 2 to inform them about priority children, identify priority children early, and start looking at potential matches. This resulted in several links and matches.
- The revised sibling training for adopters, introduced as part of the core training offer, is expected to contribute positively to outcomes.
- The project was successful in trying and testing various types of events and approaches. These were seen as very successful (leading to various links and matches) and were very well received by all stakeholders, including prospective adopters and foster carers.
- Extra capacity in the system was described as “really useful in a very, very busy team”. Although the matching lead’s role was temporary, it had significant impact on day-to-day family finding, such as monitoring Link Maker and following up potential links. It also helped to upskill new workers and support profiling, and encouraged thinking about family finding in a more strategic and creative way.
- Family finders particularly valued the proactive support the matching lead provided by identifying and following up potential links, facilitating the flow of information in a timely way, and coming up with creative ideas and options to try.

One area where some stakeholders would have liked to see more work done was targeted family finding for children with complex health needs, including working more closely with the marketing teams to identify gaps and recruit adopters in a more targeted way.

Key learning

The short project timeframe was identified as a significant challenge by senior stakeholders. They acknowledged that making connections and developing relationships, including setting up a joint project across RAAs, can take a long time. Furthermore, the post of matching lead was recruited externally, meaning that the person appointed needed time to get to know and understand the teams and organisations.

Sustainability was also identified as a significant challenge. The project provided a short-term resource and, once funding ended, the RAAs needed to find resources to continue the activities and relationships that the matching lead established. Although there was commitment to continue these, there was uncertainty about their future without additional resources.

Adoption Partnership South East: Advanced family finding, including sibling assessments and enhanced matching for sibling groups

Adoption Partnership South East (APSE) is a regional adoption agency (RAA) established in November 2020. It is a partnership between three local authorities: Kent County Council, the London Borough of Bexley, and Medway Council.

Project overview

APSE's project set out to improve outcomes for children who are part of a sibling group in adoption by addressing two key areas:

- The quality of sibling assessments, and
- The recruitment, training, and support for adopters willing to adopt sibling groups.

The project evolved from an initial focus on enhancing family finding generally to a targeted initiative responding to an identified need to strengthen sibling assessment and placement.

The project aimed to:

- improve sibling assessments to inform planning and placement decisions,
- increase the number and preparedness of adopters willing to adopt sibling groups,
- embed sustainable practices across the service to support sibling adoption, and
- enhance professional confidence and collaboration across teams.

Key activities focused on two areas:

1. Sibling assessments and care planning

- Training on 'Together or Apart' assessments was delivered to children's and adoption social workers.
- A dedicated practitioner supported more complex assessments and modelled good practice.
- Permanency planning leads were upskilled to provide advice on sibling assessments and care planning.

2. Recruitment and preparation of adopters

- A specialist training day was introduced for prospective adopters considering siblings, and all prospective adopters were offered information about sibling adoption.
- Peer support groups for sibling adopters were developed, initially in partnership with Adoption UK, then delivered internally.
- A sibling workbook was created as a follow-up resource.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five stakeholders involved in implementation: the head of service, the project manager, and three service managers/leads. Interviews took place in February and March 2024.

Findings

Feasibility: how was the project implemented?

The project shifted focus early on from establishing an advanced family-finding service for sibling groups within the Family Finding Team to more broadly targeted sibling-focused practice development.

The shift was in response to recruitment challenges and reflected a deep understanding of the service's capacity. The original plan to recruit two practitioners was abandoned due to recruitment challenges.

Participants also described the implementation of the project as “adaptive”, with several activities evolving from the original plan in response to service needs and practical challenges, particularly:

- staffing constraints (e.g. recruitment difficulties and practitioner turnover), and
- learning during implementation (e.g. considering adopter feedback and adjusting timing of support).

How the project impacted matching/family-finding practice

Stakeholders agreed that the project was successful and identified various areas where it had a clear positive impact:

- Improved understanding and confidence among professionals in relation to sibling adoption.
- Improved understanding among prospective adopters of sibling adoption, owing to improved support and training/preparation.
- Improved availability of sibling assessments.
- Improved timeliness of sibling assessments.
- Better quality sibling assessments, although with room for further improvement.
- Clearer expectations and greater consistency in practice in relation to sibling assessments.
- Increased numbers of sibling adopters and sibling placements, including for sibling groups of three.
- Stronger cross-team collaboration and professional development within the service, reflecting a cultural and attitudinal shift in relation to sibling adoption.

The stakeholders agreed that the project was highly successful in consolidating and embedding practice to ensure its sustainability beyond the funded period.

Key learning

Participants identified several key factors that contributed to the perceived success of the project. These included:

- clear aims and a focus on a specific/recognised area of need,
- flexibility to adapt,
- strong leadership, ownership, and commitment, and
- use of existing resources and internal expertise.

Coram RAA: Intensive family finding for priority children, and an outreach ambassador to support the recruitment of adopters from Black ethnic backgrounds

Coram Ambitious for Adoption regional adoption agency (RAA) works in partnership with nine local authorities in and around London.⁸ It was established in June 2019. Adopter recruitment for Coram Ambitious for Adoption is carried out through Coram's voluntary adoption agency (VAA), which also leads the RAA.

Coram RAA's project comprised two separate activity strands:

- The Step Up programme was a comprehensive and tailored approach to supporting enhanced family finding for children with harder-to-place characteristics.
- The Black Outreach Ambassador programme supported targeted outreach and adopter recruitment in Black African and Caribbean communities.

Step Up family finding

The Step Up family-finding programme is targeted at children with harder-to-place characteristics (e.g. older children, siblings, children from the global majority, those with disabilities, or those with previous disruptions).

The Step Up social worker and the child's family finder create a bespoke, time-limited plan that may include any combination of the following activities:

- profiling and visibility activities (e.g. professional video profiles and high-quality photos),
- review and enhancement of written profiles and Child's Permanence Reports,
- attendance and profiling at national activity days and exchange events, and
- ongoing review of adopter profiles and support in evaluating expressions of interest.

The plan is reviewed and adjusted at regular follow-up meetings and midway reviews. A final report summarising activities and outcomes for each child is prepared for use in matching paperwork and records.

Methods

We conducted a semi-structured group interview with three Coram RAA staff, including the RAA/project lead and the two Step Up social workers. The interview took place in March 2025.

⁸ Bromley, City of London, Harrow, Hillingdon, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster, Redbridge, Slough and Waltham Forest

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

The project was implemented as planned, with relatively minor changes to meet the needs of children, practitioners, and the wider system:

- The number of children supported exceeded initial expectations (31 instead of the planned 15) due to varying levels of support needed. This was made possible by flexibility in budgeting.
- The project developed bespoke interventions for specific children, such as therapeutic input and personalised videos (e.g. "You are special to me").⁹
- The Step Up team provided more intensive support than originally anticipated, particularly for newer family finders.
- The Step Up team were able to offer some therapeutic support to children during the family-finding stages to ensure they were emotionally ready for transition.
- There was a shift towards longer-term involvement beyond the six-month window originally planned.
- The project responded to adopter sufficiency challenges by leveraging national networks and identifying families not visible on Link Maker.

How the project impacted matching/family-finding practice

The Step Up programme was considered successful in matching children with harder-to-place characteristics. Of 31 children supported, 18 were matched within six months, with others matched later or having care plans changed.

Stakeholders identified several ways in which the Step Up programme positively impacted family-finding and matching practice:

- Enhanced family finders' capacity, confidence, and effectiveness through peer-style support from and collaboration with Step Up social workers.
- Improved resources and guidance for family finders and other professionals involved in the adoption process. Some of these were made available nationally (e.g. good practice for foster carers on taking photos and videos of children).
- Helped alleviate pressures caused by staffing shortages, high caseloads, and challenging court timelines, and provided continuity.
- Improved coordination and matching practices between the RAA and VAA (e.g. through tracking and profiling meetings), and raised awareness among local authorities of the complexity of family finding and the need for dedicated resources.

⁹ A series of short video messages recorded by key people in the child's life (e.g. foster carer) sharing positive memories / stories. The resource is used to support transition and for life story work.

Key learning from implementation

Participants identified some key factors that contributed to effective project delivery as well as learning from implementation:

- Flexibility is a key part of the model. The original model was designed as a short, intensive intervention (around six months), but there was a clear need for longer-term involvement beyond that period for some children who required extended support due to the complexity of their needs or the matching process. Similarly, some children received additional support to ensure the best possible outcomes.
- Initial concerns about Step Up social workers being perceived as external “helicopter helpers” turned out to be unfounded; family finders really welcomed the support and valued the collaborative approach. This underscores the value of partnership working and its contribution to building trust.

Black Ambassador for targeted outreach and adopter recruitment

The aims of the project were:

- Raise awareness of adoption in Black African and Caribbean communities, in response to data showing that Black children wait longer for adoption.
- Encourage more Black adopters to come forward by addressing barriers and providing tailored support.
- Deliver informal, community-based information events to engage people early in the process, before they attend formal adoption meetings.
- Build relationships with community organisations, including employers and media outlets, to amplify messaging about adoption and reach wider audiences.
- Support individuals through early stages of the adoption process, including guidance on childcare experience, reading materials, and next steps.

Methods

We conducted one semi-structured interview with the project lead. The interview took place in April 2025.

Findings

Feasibility: was the project delivered as intended?

The project was implemented largely as planned, with some adjustments along the way. The project shifted focus from increasing the number of expressions of interest and approvals in the short term to building awareness and embedding change over the medium to long term.

What did the project achieve?

The project was successful in several areas:

- Held seven informal information events, including in partnership boroughs, with 5–12 attendees per session.
- Built new relationships with community organisations, including faith-based organisations, and a variety of media outlets targeting diverse Black and Caribbean readers (e.g. Keep the Faith, The Voice, Black Ballad).
- Published real-life Black adopter stories in blogs, podcasts, advertorials, and radio interviews to promote adoption.
- Revamped the RAA's website to better reflect the diversity of families being recruited.
- Provided one-to-one guidance to help individuals explore and navigate early barriers and formal processes. Out of around 50 initial expressions of interest, three individuals progressed to stage 2 of the adoption process.

However, engagement with employers proved particularly challenging and attempts to engage major employers were limited due to cost and logistical barriers, including targeting of relevant groups.

Implementation also highlighted the importance of structural barriers for Black adopters, such as financial constraints, insecure employment, and housing, which were beyond the scope of this project.

Key learning

The project underscored the importance of longer-term funding for targeted outreach and adoption recruitment in underrepresented communities. It takes time, dedicated resources, and long-term commitment to build relationships, presence, and visibility in Black African and Caribbean communities.

The project also highlighted the importance of addressing structural barriers alongside outreach and recruitment activities to affect long-term and sustained change.

Coram-i: An algorithm-based collective matching tool for family finding

Coram-i is part of the Coram Children's Charity. It provides data-led expertise, consultancy, and resources to local authorities and other agencies to improve children's services. Collective matching is a strategic, data-driven, algorithmic approach developed by Coram-i to enhance the way children and adopters are matched.

Project overview

The purpose of collective matching is to improve the process of matching children with adoptive families by using a data-driven, algorithmic approach. Specifically, it aims to:

- Maximise the number of children matched by considering the entire pool of children and adopters collectively, rather than individually.
- Introduce strategic matching using algorithms (including Gale-Shapley stable matching) to identify the strongest matches.
- Shift the mindset in the sector to treat adopters as a scarce resource and encourage more efficient use of available families.

The project set out to test and refine the model, including accessing its feasibility, with four regional adoption agencies (RAAs) that volunteered to pilot collective matching.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two stakeholders involved in the implementation: the project lead from Coram-i and a representative from Adoption Counts, one of the RAAs that implemented the approach. A brief conversation also took place with a representative from One Adoption West Yorkshire, which was involved in testing the model. Interviews took place in February and March 2025.

Findings

Feasibility: how was the project delivered?

The project had partial success in achieving its objectives and implementing the planned activities. By the end of the project:

- A working algorithm was developed, tested, and refined based on feedback particularly around how strictly adopter preferences should be interpreted. The algorithm is available for anyone to use.
- One RAA (Adoption Counts) fully implemented the approach and integrated it into their matching practice.

However, three RAAs did not complete the pilot due to two key reasons: lack of capacity and adopter sufficiency:

- Two RAAs dropped out due to issues with data availability and quality. They were unable to provide useable data to feed into the algorithm. This was partly attributed to a lack of dedicated staff to support the project, particularly staff with data skills to liaise with social workers and manage data inputs.
- Adopter sufficiency also had a major impact on the feasibility of the project, as the model relies on a reasonably large pool of adopters and children. The third RAA, although keen on the approach, found it challenging to implement the model in the context of adopter shortages and a general shift towards early linking of adopters. This RAA links most of its adopters during the assessment process: approval and link often happen at the same panel.

Impact on family finding and matching

Despite implementation challenges, the project raised awareness of the limitations of traditional matching and encouraged RAAs to think more strategically about 'the bigger picture' in matching children with approved adopters.

The RAA Adoption Counts fully implemented collective matching. The approach is now embedded in practice and is regarded as having had a positive impact on matching and family finding.

- There was some initial resistance from family finders, who were concerned that the model might override their professional judgement. Consequently, the approach was introduced gradually to test the accuracy of the algorithm and build confidence and buy-in before full implementation.
- The algorithm uses 'matching considerations' extracted from children's and adopters' records in the RAA's case management system. It took time and effort to ensure that all adopters and children had their matching considerations properly recorded in the system, but practitioners gradually adopted the practice once they recognised its value and the importance of maintaining high-quality data.
- The model generates a matrix of potential matches, which is manually reviewed and refined by a data coordinator. Collective matching could be fully automated, but the RAA decided to retain human input as an additional reassurance.
- A collective matching report is presented at the monthly strategic matching meeting to guide discussions. There is a view that collective matching helps to ensure fairness by systematically considering all children and all available families each month.
- The model led to several successful matches, including for children and adopters who had been waiting a long time and might otherwise have been overlooked. There is a view that collective matching helps reduce unconscious bias in decision-making and ensures fairer consideration for all children and adopters.
- Social workers embraced the approach – particularly as adopter numbers declined – viewing it as a useful tool that supports rather than replaces their role and professional judgement. Collective matching is seen to support fairness, efficiency, and strategic decision-making in family finding and matching.

Key learning from implementation

Key learning from the project as a whole highlighted the importance of dedicated resources and a stronger organisational commitment from pilot sites. Specifically:

- Funding for a dedicated staff member within each RAA to manage data and support implementation.
- Financial or strategic incentive to increase sustained engagement.
- Early and senior-level buy-in to ensure effective implementation.
- Assessment of pilot/implementation readiness of sites.

Several factors helped the successful introduction of collective matching at Adoption Counts:

- The model was introduced slowly to build confidence and embed practice.
- Supportive leadership from Coram-i and RAA managers helped build momentum and openness to change. This tapped into practitioners' "appetite for change", to try something different.
- The data coordinator's role was instrumental in supporting implementation of the model.

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