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New challenges or different opportunities? Voluntary adoption agencies and the shifting terrain of child care services

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New Challenges or Different Opportunities? Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Shifting Terrain of Child Care Services

Abstract

This paper examines some of the developments and trends that affected the fluctuating relationship between state and voluntary provision of adoption services in England during New Labour's terms of office. Using examples drawn from the work and experiences of one voluntary adoption agency, the paper explores the tensions within this relationship and the increase in state regulation of child care services. In order to consider the demands of recent reforms and initiatives upon voluntary adoption agencies and the ways they have been able to negotiate the adoption market, particular attention is paid to the impact of equalities legislation upon faith-based adoption agencies and to the practical and symbolic role of the inter-agency fee in the relationship between the state and voluntary sector. The paper concludes by considering recent interventions in this area by the Conservative-led coalition government and their implications for VAAs.

Introduction

During New Labour's terms of office, questions and concerns about the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector in England came together in revealing ways around the increased level of regulation and management of adoption services and, more especially, the financial viability of services delivered by voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs).[1] Such

1

questions and concerns were not new. Historical research has consistently indicated the shifting and fluctuating role of voluntarism in child welfare policy (Fink 2008; Grier 2001; Hendrick 2003; Keating 2009) as well as the 'moving frontier' between the state and the voluntary sector (Finlayson 1994). The long tradition of 'partnerships' between the state and voluntary organisations (Lewis 1999, 2005) in taking responsibility for the provision of care for children separated from their birth family, including in the arrangement of adoptions, has been shaped similarly by these ebbs and flows in connections between the state and civil society (Harris 2010; Newman 2005). Nevertheless the New Labour governments' interventions in the regulation of, and (financial) responsibility for, adoption services generated a very particular set of tensions in voluntary-statutory relations and for the work of VAAs.

The aim of this paper is to explore these tensions through the effects they had upon one VAA, St Francis Children's Society (St. Francis), [2] and to consider how they continue to be played out in the Conservative-led coalition government, elected in May 2010. St Francis is based in Milton Keynes and has its origins in the child rescue movement of the late nineteenth century (Hall and Howes 1965; Lawrence and Starkey 2001; Prochaska 2006; Swain 2009)[3]. Its core business is now the assessment, approval and support of adopters for children who are 'looked after' (or 'accommodated') by local authorities. We are able to focus upon this example after working with St. Francis between January and May 2010 as part of a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP)[4] in which the organisation was looking to re-assess the strategic direction of its work given the challenges posed by changing nature of the adoption market.[5] In our roles as Knowledge Base (University) partners and Research Associate, we undertook research into developments and current trends in child care policy and practice and advised on potential areas for business development.

Using St Francis' relationship to, and negotiation of, recent adoption legislation, policy and practice as our over-arching analytical framework, our paper offers a differently inflected approach to many other studies of the voluntary sector and the work of VAAs. On the one hand it brings into view an example taken from the many small-scale, local agencies which, as Halfpenny and Reid (2002) suggest, have tended to be neglected in voluntary sector research over the past two decades. On the other, our interest in the effects of recent legislative changes upon VAAs, and St Francis in particular, offers another level of insight into the adoption market from that provided by the more frequent studies in this area which tend to be focused upon the quality of services delivered by local authority and voluntary adoption agencies and their outcomes (see, for example, Cossar and Neil 2010; Rushton 2003; Sellick 2007).

While we draw upon the experiences of St Francis to examine how the changing field of adoption has impacted upon the voluntary sector, it is also important to note that the nature of St Francis' work and its specialization in particular services cannot be unproblematically mapped onto that undertaken by VAAs more generally. As the *Adoption Now* report highlighted: 'The differences between the voluntary agencies may be as significant as those between them and the local authorities' (DoH 1999:104). Nevertheless while generalizations cannot be drawn about 'the respective characteristics or merits' of different agencies, there are commonalities in that these agencies are more specialized than local authorities with their work 'more often organised around adoption and in as much as their social workers devoted most of their time to adoption' (ibid). Our focus on St Francis is, thereby, shaped by this understanding of the commonalities between VAAs and what they might reveal about the effects of changes in adoption policy and legislation for the voluntary sector.

For this reason we begin our discussion with some contextual details about the adoption market created by the New Labour governments and the work of St Francis. We then go on to consider two configurations of influence which had important effects for the position of St Francis and other VAAs and which formed the backdrop and impetus to the KTP project. First was the impact of new legislation on the ability of Catholic adoption agencies to obtain charitable funding, in particular as a result of the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations of 2007. The second configuration was the issue of the inter-agency fee, which is payable to a VAA by a local authority when a child is placed with VAA approved adopters; this fee plays a powerful practical role in the ways in which local authority and voluntary adoption agencies negotiate the adoption market and a symbolic one in understandings of the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector. We conclude by examining the changes, continuities and competing pressures that have emerged for VAAs over the past decade and consider the implications for the future of VAAs given the scale of cuts to public spending by the current Conservative-led coalition government.

Setting the scene: New Labour's imperatives and the work of St Francis Children's Society

From the early years of New Labour's modernizing agenda (Clarke, Gewirtz and McLaughlin 2000; Newman 2001), there were numerous initiatives to restructure and reform child care services, driven by a determination to implement improvements in child protection as well as outcomes for children in care (Parton 2006). These were connected to growing anxieties about the overall failings of the childcare and child protection systems (Ferguson 2004; Langan 2010) and took place in the context of 'an apparently endless series of scandals involving physical and sexual abuse by staff in children's homes [and] violent deaths of children in families under social services supervision' (Langan 2000: 153). The Adoption and

Children Act 2002 (fully put into practice on 31 December 2005), and its accompanying guidelines and policies (Ball 2005), were some of the first major legal steps in New Labour's modernizing of child care services. The political determination to implement better planning to avoid children 'drifting' in the care system and to identify 'permanent family placements, especially for younger children' (Thompson and Hughes 2003: 233) meant that adoption became an increasingly preferred option. The number of adoptions of children from care rose, as a result, from 3100 in 2001 to 3800 in 2005. Nevertheless, and despite the increase in referrals of children into care proceedings following the 'Baby P' case (CAFCASS 2010), these numbers have not been sustained (Hannon *et al* 2010) but have rather gradually decreased to only 3200 adoptions from care in the year ending 31 March 2010 (DCSF 2010). Moreover the recent Policy Exchange Report, *No place like home: Improving adoption services in England* (Groves 2010), and research from the Adoption Research initiative (ARi), have indicated that for perhaps as many as 25% of children with adoption recommendations (which is over 1000 children) an adoptive family is never found.

Throughout each successive New Labour government, local authorities were regularly held accountable for the 'shortcomings' of child care and adoption services, including variations in adoption rates across the country and delays in placing children for adoption (Dey 2005; Selwyn *et al* 2006, but see also Clifford *et al* 2003; Garrett 2002). As Roy Parker (2010: 11) has argued, social workers and those with whom they work continued to face '[c]onsiderable opprobrium' while charges of political correctness and bureaucracy were repeatedly directed at local authorities (Garrett 2002). Yet throughout the review and implementation of policy and legislative reform to address 'failings' in child care and child protection services, this critical gaze was rarely leveled at voluntary agencies which remained 'the respectable face of adoption practice' (Douglas and Philpot 2003: 170) both in

terms of would-be adopters' experiences and the higher levels of success in their placements. For instance, despite working with a higher proportion of 'difficult to place' children, data collected by the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) indicated that VAAs achieved higher success rates than local authority adoption services (Selwyn *et al* 2009) with the rate of placement breakdown for VAAs averaging 6%, compared with 20% for local authorities (Groves 2010).

Nevertheless various aspects of New Labour's reforms and initiatives adversely affected the position of St. Francis and the work of VAAs more broadly, not least because of the unequal dynamic of 'partnership' working in this area wherein 'voluntary agencies only have access to children available for adoption through local authorities except in the case of a small minority of infant placements' (Connor 2003: 242). Children for whom adoptive placements are sought are legally in the care of local authorities, and they are usually living with either local authority foster carers or private foster carers paid for by the local authority, whilst awaiting a suitable 'match' with an approved adoptive family. However, although the majority of adoptive placements in England are with families who have been assessed and approved by local authorities, VAAs have continued to play a significant role. The core business of St Francis, for example, is focused on the assessment, approval and support of adopters for a wide range of children who are 'looked after' by local authorities and for whom adoption has been recommended.

In line with its broader aims,[6] St Francis seeks to place children from a variety of ages and backgrounds, recruiting families from within approximately a 50 mile radius of its office, mainly in order to ensure that the families will have good access to support after the adoption placement. Its commitment to placing children from diverse backgrounds is

achieved by running, for example, specialized projects to expand awareness of, and find families for, children who are 'harder to place' such as black and ethnic minority children (*Anancy Black Families*) and children with disabilities and special needs (*Widening Horizons*). It also enjoys an excellent reputation as a professional, high quality service provider and was rated as 'outstanding' in a recent Ofsted report. In May 2009 its work was featured as part of the well-received Channel 4 series, *Find Me A Family*, which set out to provide would-be adopters with hands-on experiences to encourage them to consider adopting children who are often overlooked.[7]

The number of adoptive placements arranged by St Francis has fluctuated over recent years. These have averaged about 14 placements per year and, in this, its adoption activities are similar to other VAAs, which have an average case load of 13, half that of local authorities (DoH 1999: 102). St Francis placed 18 children in the year ended 31 March 2010 and aims to increase incrementally the number of its adoptive placements in forthcoming years. However at the point of writing, and in the context of anxieties about unemployment and the economic recession, it has experienced some difficulties in the recruitment of potential adopters (Murrer 2010).

In addition St Francis provides support for adult adoptees as well as birth relatives who have a historic connection with the organization and it maintains extensive archives of its past adoption cases. It offers commissioned services to other agencies, including local authorities. These include counselling and support for birth relatives of children who are in the process of being (or recently have been) adopted; specialist assessments for kinship, special guardianship or step parent adoption placements; and provision of experienced chairs of adoption panels and disruption meetings. It also provides a range of therapeutic

services, such as life-story work and theraplay, specifically for children and young people who have been adopted or otherwise removed from their birthparents. Recently St Francis has diversified into services more distinctly outside of the area of adoption and looked-after children, by developing a range of school-based services including professional counselling for children and young people with social and emotional difficulties.

St Francis can thus be regarded as a successful, resourceful and versatile VAA, responding to the New Labour governments' determination to improve and extend adoption support services that recognise 'the lifelong implications of adoption' (DoH 2003: 23) while maintaining a highly successful reputation, at the local level, for finding families for children who are considered 'harder to place'. It has established different ways of working and used the skills acquired over many years to adjust to this new world of child welfare (Utting 1997, Waterhouse 2000, Laming 2003, 2009), illustrating how VAAs have affirmed their capacity to deal with the increasingly complex field of child welfare as well as the changing demands of adoption services in recent years. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that policy advisers have called for better use of the long-standing and specialised experience and skills of VAAs, like St Francis, and criticized local authorities over their reluctance to make greater use of their services. James Groves has argued, for example:

> At present, a balanced approach which harnesses the potential of both the public and voluntary sectors is not being applied to the provision of adoption services. Many LAs are failing to place real emphasis on applying strategic commissioning to the shaping and development of adoption services. This is despite a raft of policy guidance from central government on the issue of joint commissioning across children's services in recent years. Consequently, the development of a more innovative, diverse and advanced provider base is being hampered (Groves 2010:1).

Yet for all its successes and excellent reputation, and despite recommendations for closer alliances between local authorities and VAAs, St Francis' position in the adoption market was far from secure at the beginning of 2010 as our discussion now highlights.

The increasing regulation and control of voluntary adoption agencies

One relatively late addition to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 were provisions allowing same-sex couples to adopt jointly (Brown and Cocker 2008), which were presented by the New Labour government as an opportunity to ensure that potential adoptive parents could be recruited from the widest possible pool and that, as a result, more children in care would find adoptive homes (Dey 2005). This became particularly relevant to St. Francis with the implementation of the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2007) which required that VAAs provide their services on an equal basis to all prospective adopters, regardless of their sexual orientation. The implications of the Act generated intense debate, with Vincent Nicholls, Archbishop of Birmingham at that time and the Catholic Church's spokesperson on child policy, arguing that Catholic adoption agencies should be exempted from the legislation (McCormack and Hayes 2007) because to place children with gay couples would be acting against Roman Catholic belief. However, in a statement released in January 2007, Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, was adamant that there would be no exemptions 'for faith-based adoption agencies offering public-funded services from regulations that prevent discrimination' but that they would get 21 months to prepare for change, calling this a 'sensible compromise'.

Faith-based adoption agencies negotiated the effects and outcomes of the Equality Act and the demands of Blair's 'compromise' in different ways. For St Francis, the legislation was to fundamentally affect its relationship with the Catholic Church, as well as its position within

the Diocese because, having taken the decision to continue its adoption services in compliance with the 2007 Regulations, the formal ties between the organization and the Catholic Church ceased. As a result it was no longer able to benefit from official collections within the Diocese and consequently lost a significant amount of Church donation income that had previously been used to fund much of its adoption work. Some Catholic child welfare agencies, such as the Catholic Children's Rescue Society, ceased their adoption assessment work but continued to provide other services and one, Catholic Care, has recently lost its two-year battle against the Charity Commission's decision not to allow it to restrict its adoption service to heterosexual couples. The Equality Act thus had major organisational and financial impacts for all those voluntary agencies with connections to the Catholic Church.

The state's assumption of greater responsibility for certain child care services in recent years has meant that the scope for voluntary agencies has also been curtailed by direct local authority provision. Following the Adoption and Children Act (2002), for example, there was a legal requirement for local authorities to provide adoption support services and they were given £70 million in government grants over three years to invest in their development (Selwyn *et al* 2009). As a result, it has become more difficult for VAAs to obtain funding for this type of work as it is now understood to be a local authority responsibility. At the same time, opportunities for VAAs to diversify or extend their services in other ways often depend upon the availability of one-off grants. Such grants frequently involve a level of control by the funder, thus making the 'business' of adoption more expensive for VAAs. As Nevile (2010) has argued about the funding of third sector organizations more broadly, greater restrictions may result in higher costs: 'The more prescriptive the funding, the more time the organization has to put into monitoring and reporting, costs that can continue months

after the project, and the funding, ceased' (Nevile 2010: 544). New Labour's reform of child

welfare services consequently often reconfigured the adoption market in ways which had an

adverse impact upon VAAs, resulting in more expensive procedures and increased

bureaucracy. At the same time other government measures such as, in the case of St

Francis, the 2007 Regulations, cut off existing sources of independent funding. Crucially,

however, the financial effects of the equalities legislation on Catholic VAAs also brought

increased attention - and urgency - to the inter-agency fee debate. These measures raised

the question of who should properly fund adoptions, and whether the voluntary sector

should be 'subsidising' adoptive placements and, if so, by what means?

Negotiating the inter-agency fee[8]

The Adoption Act (1976) is widely regarded as a significant piece of legislation in that it

provided adopted adults with the right to seek their birth parents. However, it also required

local authorities to provide a comprehensive adoption service for the first time. Until then, as

Selwyn *et al* (2009) have outlined, the responsibility for some parts of adoption services had

been almost entirely held by the VAAs. Thus, although government policy encouraged the

development of local authority services, it also recognised the extent of knowledge and

expertise that lay within VAAs. It acknowledged that VAAs employed more experienced staff

and had higher payroll costs than local authorities. To ensure, therefore, 'that children

continued to be placed, the inter-agency fee was created' (Selwyn *et al* 2009: 3) with the

result that this fee is now payable to a VAA by a local authority when a child is placed with

VAA approved adopters. Yet it is the inter-agency fee which has also long appeared to be

an influential factor in hampering a more 'equal' partnership between VAAs and local

authorities in the adoption market. This is so for two reasons: first, the fee does not cover

the actual cost to the VAA of assessing, approving and supporting an adoptive placement

and, secondly, the fee for placements with VAA approved adopters is higher than the fee for placements with adopters approved by local authorities.

The fee is a symbolic representation and an actual indication of the unequal balance between state and voluntary sector in the funding of adoption services. As recent research in the Government commissioned report *Adoption and the Inter-Agency Fee* (Selwyn *et al* 2009) demonstrates, whilst it is intended to pay for the cost of the assessment and support of an adoptive family, in reality the fee is set at lower than the actual cost. This effectively forces a 'subsidy' of the placement on the part of voluntary agencies. As a result VAAs rely on other, additional, sources of funding for their adoption work; funds which, as we have noted above, are not always easy to elicit or economical to administer. At the same time, a failure to factor in the public sector's own fixed overhead costs enables local authorities to perceive their own placements as 'cost-free' whilst viewing placements with other local authorities as being arranged at apparently much lower costs than those offered by the VAAs (Groves 2010).

Although an inter-agency fee is also payable by one local authority to another, the fee payable to VAAs is set at a higher level than for placements with other local authorities. Selwyn *et al* (2009), for example, noted that:

> In reality this means that if a local authority recruits, assesses and approves an adoptive family and another LA then 'purchases' this placement the LA receives income of £12,660. If the LA has to 'purchase' an adoptive placement from a voluntary adoption agency (VAA) the charge is £23,204 (Selwyn *et al* 2009: 1).

This makes it seemingly more expensive for a local authority to place a child who is in its care with a family approved by a VAA. The inter-agency fee thus arguably provides a

financial incentive for local authorities to administer their own adoption services or to deal directly with other local councils, rather than by strategically commissioning voluntary agencies and developing longer-term relationships with them. According to the critical report by James Groves, the inter-agency fee acts as a deterrent to the policy of moving children out of long-term foster care into stable adoptive homes because:

> the inter-agency fee is grossly underestimating the value of the adoption 'market', starving VAAs of financial oxygen and leaving LAs under a false impression as to the costs involved in matching and securing a successful adoption placement (Groves 2010:2).

The significance of the inter-agency fee in a volatile adoption market is magnified still further by the way in which local authorities generally deal with VAAs on a 'spot purchase' rather than a contractual basis, and because the fee is only payable once a child has been placed. Hence VAAs, like St Francis, bear a significant financial risk when assessing and approving adopters as they do not know whether the prospective adopters will complete the adoption process or whether they will eventually be matched (Selwyn *et al* 2009).

As a result many VAAs have found it increasingly challenging to continue their adoption services. Some 40% have indicated that their financial future is in jeopardy, other VAAs have already closed (Groves 2010), while St Francis sought to identify new areas of development through a KTP. Selwyn and Sempik (2011) argue that this situation appears to the product of a series of unintended consequences resulting from 'various government interventions intended to *promote* adoption' [original emphasis] (Selwyn and Sempik 2011: 429). However the question of how any adjustment of inter-agency fees to reflect the actual costs for VAAs might be managed remained as open as it had been since the introduction of the 1976 Adoption Act (PIU 2000).

Changes, continuities and concluding remarks

New Labour introduced major new pieces of legislation and regulation in the field of adoption and fostering, as well as in the broader child care field, while changes in prevention and safeguarding practice following a series of high profile child protection cases led to an increased rate of referrals into the child care system. The lesson that policy advisors drew from these cases was that the key failing of the past was 'a failure to intervene early enough' (Parton 2006: 152). There was, therefore, continued support for adoption as a 'permanent' solution to problems of parental incapacity with recommendations that children were adopted at an earlier stage rather than as a last resort. This approach was codified in the 2002 Adoption and Children Act (Hannon *et al* 2010) and supported by research showing good evidence that local authorities were justified in bringing care proceedings (Masson *et al* 2008). It is likely that many of these children who came into care will eventually receive an adoption placement. Yet, as Masson (2010) has argued, given the volume of regulations now imposed on local authorities, and the many different points on which their decisions can be challenged in the courts, delays will continue. However significant numbers of children will also continue to remain in the care system, as they have in the past, because they do not receive an 'adoption recommendation'.

A concern with the falling numbers of children being adopted and the effectiveness of adoption services has been a regular focus of interventions by the Conservative-led coalition government since it came to power in May 2010, but the questions raised have been narrow and suggested resolutions have offered little different or original in approach. In November 2010, Tim Loughton, the Children's Minister, issued a stern directive to local authorities on behalf of the government. He returned to the same issues which had been singled out as problematic features of local authority adoption services since the 1980s, and which New

Labour's legislative and policy interventions had sought to address. He highlighted the wide variation in adoption rates amongst local authorities (from 2% to 16% of all looked-after children), the high rate of adoption break-downs ('as many as 20% of non-infant adoptions'), and the enduring problem of delays ('only 72% of children being placed within 12 months of the adoption decision') (Loughton 2010). Once again he blamed bureaucratic legal processes and the legacy of 'political correctness' as well as 'over sensitivity on the grounds of ethnicity when it comes to the matching of children with prospective adopters' (Pemberton 2010). Once again he advocated stronger partnerships between the state and the voluntary sector in order to improve services, claiming: 'I have a strong sense that in some areas the perception of how an adoption service should be run does not take full account of the role the voluntary sector can play in partnership with the local authority' (Loughton 2010).

An enhanced role for voluntary agencies in the delivery of public services is consistent with David Cameron's rhetoric about the Big Society. Hence it might be argued that VAAs such as St. Francis are well placed to play an increasing part in the multifaceted nature of child care services that have emerged from New Labour's policy interventions, or that voluntary agencies look set to retain a place in the policies of this government as it seeks to address the seemingly intractable difficulties of improving the experiences of children in the care of the state. At a time of increasing public sector austerity, there is good evidence that adoption provides a more cost-effective option than fostering (which still caters for 75% of looked after children). This is true both in the short term and in terms of saving the longer term social costs that result from poor childcare outcomes (Bullock 2009; Groves 2010). The growing pressure to reduce public expenditure may open up, therefore, new opportunities

for VAAs, if their services are perceived as offering a 'cheaper' alternative to foster care as well as better outcomes for children.

The government's revised Adoption Guidance (DoE 2011) is consistent in its support of VAAs and critique of those local authorities which are reluctant to use their services because of concerns regarding the costs of inter-agency fees. There are repeated assertions about the 'clear evidence that there is little difference in the cost of placing a child with the local authority's own adopters and adopters from a voluntary adoption agency' (DoE 2011: 2) and an unequivocal statement about the inter-agency fee having no place in decisions about the placement of a child: '*Unwillingness to pay an inter-agency fee should not be the reason for not placing the child*' [original emphasis] (DoE 2011: 88). Similarly Loughton issued a 'call to arms' to local authorities 'to re-energise their efforts and improve frontline practice' in the government's response to the Third Report from the Children, Schools and Families Committee (House of Commons Education Committee 2011: 16) and, in relation to the causes of 'delay' in placing children, indicated that possible solutions might be generated through the government's support of Barnardo's and Coram to work with local authorities which have poor adoption rates.

Yet the pressure upon local authorities to place more children for adoption and to do so more quickly, does not sit easily with the extent of cuts now being implemented by central government and which local authorities will have to manage. With decision-making about the cuts being handed down to local authorities, central government is not in a position to guard those services which it views as having potential for improvement or development. Thus, irrespective of government rhetoric about 'raising the profile of adoption' (DoE: 2), reductions in local authority budgets mean that services in the adoption, fostering and

broader childcare fields will undoubtedly be affected. Moreover local authorities are likely to commission the provision of core, and legally required, services only, rather than those provided by VAAs, which could be considered 'extra', additional or incurring the cost of a higher inter-agency fee. At the same time, there is little indication that the government is committed to funding the activities of the voluntary sector despite the positive emphasis given to its flexibility and independence. Indeed, as Newman argues (2010), 'voluntary organisations [are now] faced with the paradox of cuts to their funding just at the point where it would seem that their role should be expanding.' And it is likely, therefore, that there will be continued expectations for third-sector agencies to subsidise their work from other sources as they have in the past (Selwyn and Sempik 2011, citing Bhutta, 2005).

In a period of such major reductions in public expenditure, expectations about the capacity of VAAs to subsidise their work through donations, grants and income generated from other services combined with preconceptions about the higher costs of their adoption services look set not only to affect their capacity to engage competitively in the adoption market but also to threaten their future as service providers more generally. This is of considerable concern given recent research which suggests that local authorities do not have sufficient capacity to approve all of the adopters needed by children who are in the care of the State (Clifford 2011: 29) and evidence that VAAs, like St. Francis, are more successful in recruiting adopters for 'hard to place' children (Groves 2010). This may be the moment, then, to re-assess the nature of partnership working between local authorities and VAAs, for both face an uncertain future while the potential repercussions for looked-after children with a 'adoption recommendation' are of greater seriousness. As the example of Coram and Harrow Council illustrates, it is possible for effective partnerships to be constructed around the delivery of adoption services and to meet the different demands placed upon them, thereby

improving care management decision-making, ensuring more and earlier permanent adoptive relationships and reducing care costs for the authority (Coram 2011; Selwyn and Wijedasa 2009).

However opening up more possibilities for partnership working between the different sectors will require a broader review of the ways in which adoption services are resourced and delivered, including revisions to the inter-agency fee in order to acknowledge the actual costs of adoption. As Groves (2010) has recommended, all adoption agencies, both public and voluntary, need to be aware of the most recent breakdown of costs and the minimal differences between what both types of agencies were actually spending (Selwyn *et al* 2009). Similarly there should be greater recognition on the part of local authorities about the savings that successful adoption placements by VAAs make to the costs of children remaining in long term foster care (Selwyn and Sempik 2011). There is now, as this paper has demonstrated, a powerful body of evidence from different studies about the costs associated with adoption and the 'value-for-money' services provided by VAAs. Moreover this evidence has been explicitly drawn upon by the coalition government to argue that there is no reason why local authorities should not be working in closer partnerships with VAAs to ensure that children are placed for adoption more quickly and more successfully. Yet to establish such partnerships will make different demands upon the different actors involved. First it will require a more long-term approach to the commissioning and delivery of adoption services by local authorities, encouraging an earlier involvement with VAAs with regard to the scoping of services (Groves 2010) and a shift away from the 'spot purchase' approach through which local authorities have tended to work the voluntary sector. Secondly, given the differences between VAAs in terms of both their size and their skills, expertise and specialisms, partnership working will pose different challenges and offer

different opportunities for them. How these might be acknowledged and managed will need to be embedded in the ways in which individual VAAs and the CVAA promote and disseminate their services at local and national levels. Finally, the government's focus on improving adoption services and increasing adoption rates has not recognized the effects which recent legislative changes have had upon the capacity of VAAs to fund their services or, in turn, to negotiate the adoption market competitively. For VAAs like St. Francis, any opportunities to engage more fully in partnership working with local authorities will demand greater financial security not least because, at present, 'the funding streams for voluntary organisations are very complicated and take an enormous amount of staff time to handle' (Lewis 2005: 128). Only policy interventions by central government around the funding of VAAs can tackle the level of insecurity they currently face while, at the same time, only greater financial resourcing by the state of the adoption system as a whole will ensure that the actual costs of meeting the needs of some of our most vulnerable children can be appropriately addressed.

Endnotes

[1] There are 150 local authority adoption agencies and 32 VAAs in England, with the latter brought together under the umbrella of the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA). See http://www.cvaa.org.uk for details about the different VAAs and the Consortium.

[2] St Francis Children's Society's web-site provides up-to-date and extensive information about its work and aims: http://www.sfcs.org.uk/

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