

Report of the Head of Children's Social Work and Child Protection

DEVELOPMENT OF A REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY (RAA)

The purpose of this paper is to;

- Brief members on the development of the RAA locally
- Outline current performance.

The decision on next steps in the RAA development will be taken to cabinet in April.

Members are asked to consider the report and identify any additional issues that should be considered prior to cabinet.

1. Introduction

In June 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) published 'Regionalising Adoption' and asked all adoption agencies in England to consider how to work much more closely together on a regional basis. This was enacted as the Education and Adoption Act 2016 which encourages authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to join together to form Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA). The Government's view is that structural change will improve the process for children and adopters

Devon County Council is already part of an existing adoption partnership with other authorities, Plymouth CC, Torbay BC, Somerset CC, Barnardo's and Families for Children, called Adopt South West¹. This is one of 19 groupings of local authorities and voluntary sector adoption agencies nationally.

The DfE expect the RAA programme to deliver consistently good and more innovative adoption practice that ensures improved life chances for children, in particular through;

- Improved adopter recruitment
- Improved timeliness of placing children
- More children achieving permanence through adoption
- Improved adoption support.

DCC and its partners have secured £607,000 funding to date, which has enabled us to mobilise joint activities to design a RAA for the Adopt South West area. This funding covers the cost of the project until March 2018 by which time the DfE expect the newly formed RAA to start operating. Collaboration with the Voluntary Agency sector in the service design is a requirement.

¹ Somerset County Council, Devon County Council, Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council at the time joined by Barnardo's and Families for Children as the Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

The anticipated benefits for our children and adopters across the region are:

- Increase in permanence through adoption
- Maximise sustainable adoptions in the region
- Improve permanence timelines
- Practice Improvements across the RAA
- Improve the adoption scorecard.

The anticipated benefits for Devon County Council are:

- Investment in adoption and early permanence to combat costs of care downstream.
- Improve quality assurance in the process which reduces cost.
- Better shared resources across the region to improve value for money.

This report seeks to update Scrutiny Members on the significant progress and improvements in these areas and to assure members that continuing to improve outcomes for children and adopters remains a priority within children's services, across the Council and with partners.

2. Current performance across the LAs

One of the key issues for the RAA development is the current differential in adoption performance across the LAs. There is a need to secure best practice and outcomes and share this across the RAA guarding against any deterioration in performance.

Child timeliness for children who have been adopted			
		Average number of days between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (Scorecard indicator A1)	Average time between an LA receiving court authority to place a child and the LA deciding on a match to an adoptive family (Scorecard indicator A2)
		2015-16	2015-16
ALL LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND		523	243
SOUTH WEST		430	201
	Devon	409	183
	Plymouth	426	222
	Somerset	382	167
	Torbay	360	154

Table 1; Timeliness for children who have been adopted²

Taken from the Adoption Leadership Returns (2015/16, published in March 2016), the performance of the Local Authorities across the Adopt South West collaboration, compares favourably with both the South West region and the England indicators. It highlights that there is currently differential performance across the four LA areas which reflects a difference in practice across the LAs.

² **Adoption Leadership Board Local Level data for 2015/16**
Data Source: Local_level_ALB_data_Quarter_4_2015_to_2016.ods

At the time these statistics were published, the A3 Scorecard Indicator, 'Percentage of children who wait less than 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family' was not published. This data will be published for 2015 – 2017 after the March 2017 ALB submissions.

		Number of adoption orders granted 2015/16
ALL LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND		2,600
SOUTH WEST		250
	Devon	35
	Plymouth	15
	Somerset	30
	Torbay	x

Table 2: Number of Adoption Orders Granted

At present 32% of the South West region's adoption orders are granted to the four local authorities within the Adopt South West. Analysis on future trends can be undertaken once the 2016/17 data becomes available.

	Devon (2014 – 16)	SN Average (2012 – 16)	England Average (2012 – 16)
Adoption Scorecard A1: time between child entering care and placement for adoption	476 Days	517 Days	593 days
Adoption Scorecard A2: time between receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match	171 days	152 days	223 days
Adoption Scorecard A3: Children waiting less than 16 months between entering care and placement for adoption	63.6%	n/a	47%
Adoption 1: Percentage of looked after children who ceased to be looked after who were adopted	14.8%	16%	14%

Table 3: Adoption KPIs; Extract from Devon County Council Adoption Scorecard Quarter 2 2016/17³

The Q2 figures show a positive impact to improvement work undertaken to improve timeliness for children. An action plan is in place to improve the A2 indicator including:

- Early identification of children for whom adoption may be the plan.
- Family finding at the earliest opportunity.
- Increased scrutiny at the Permanency Tracking Meetings held monthly.

³ Data Source: ALB Adoption Survey, CareFirst and Adoption Database

- An 'Activity Day', run on Saturday 25th February which resulted in 21 expressions of interest from adopters for the children who attended.

3. Progress with the RAA to date

In July 2016, Devon County Council became the lead LA for the Adopt South West RAA project, with the recommendation that the RAA legal delivery mechanism would initially be a shared service with a local authority as host. Devon was to take the lead for the forthcoming year whilst all the risks are analysed. Alternative options such as a LATC, Joint Venture between the LAs and VAAs and a fully outsourced model were considered as possible models for the future; subject to more detailed analysis and options appraisal.

Two Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) operating in the region, Barnardo's and Families for Children, have remained partners in the work but have confirmed that they wish to remain outside of any RAA arrangement so that they can retain their own identity and continue to be commissioned to provide services locally.

During January 2017, design principles for the RAA were established between the four local authorities. For example;

- The scope of services; e.g. the RAA would include both permanence through adoption and SGO but not step-parent adoptions.
- The RAA must create efficiencies for each LA from year 1.
- As many decisions as possible should be delegated to the new RAA.
- Relevant budgets are delegated to the RAA which will operate within budgets, in line with contractual arrangements and will be accountable to a Governance Body.
- The decision about staffing arrangements should be dictated by practice improvement requirements.
- The RAA will be fully accountable for delivery and inspection.
- A mixed delivery model can be considered where this is likely to be viable (e.g. outsourcing adoption support).

Significant work is still required to establish a RAA. To meet the requirements of the DfE the project has focused on two key areas of work;

3.1 People and Practice

The focus of this work stream is to improve practice ahead of the eventual launch of the RAA. Adopters, operational staff and external stakeholders have been brought together to map and analyse existing working practices across the region's adoption services and agree best practice.

Three priority areas for practice improvements and efficiencies were established:

- Shared Adoption Panels to improve timeliness of key decisions.
- Joining marketing, recruitment and assessment activities to increase the pool of suitable adopters.

- Improving matching and placement practices to increase the number of children placed successfully.

The project is in the process of developing more detailed business cases for these priority areas clearly highlighting the link to achieving the DfE objectives and each of the Local Authorities' priorities. The first of these will be ready during Spring 2017.

Individual policies and procedures will need to be reviewed and aligned across the four LAs in appropriate areas whilst some may remain separate, e.g. relating to adoption and SGO allowances.

HR colleagues are working together to consider the options relating to the employment of staff, e.g. through TUPE or secondment arrangements. Consideration is being given to the location of staff in order to maintain links with each LA but to create links between staff working for the new RAA. Training and support for new ways of working in a single RAA are being considered and plans will need to be agreed for the ongoing professional development of staff.

3.2 Commercial Delivery

A second work stream focusses on defining the structural, financial and operational components of the RAA which includes the funding mechanism between the four local authorities and how staff will be employed.

The methodology for the four LAs contributing to the RAA is still to be determined. This could be based on demographics or outputs, i.e. each authority contributes based on the number of adoptions it receives.

Work on a joint supplier list for the purpose of Adoption Support Fund applications has been undertaken with the aim of having a regional supplier list and harmonised contracts and specifications in place by June 2017. Progress made under this work stream enabled us to make a further grant application during the second round of the Practice and Improvement Fund to become a pilot project for managing a devolved regional Adoption Support Fund budget. A grant of £33 0000 was awarded.

4. Conclusion

There is a regional appetite to establish a RAA and a commitment to this being the vehicle to share best practice, improve outcomes and create efficiencies in this area.

However, significant potential early risks and complexities have been identified, such as the creation of a pooled budget for the service, arrangements for the employment of staff and the oversight and accountability for performance by the new agency.

The intention is to submit an initial business case for the RAA which evaluates these risks and considers how they will be met in any new arrangement for Cabinet consideration in April 2017.

Work on the specifications and procurement activities will continue with authority delegated to the Executive Member for Children's Services to approve the detailed proposals later in 2017 once the business case has been fully developed.

Once the RAA business case is approved, the work will focus on the transition of the individual Local Authorities' services to the RAA by April 2018.

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Skills: Councillor James McInnes

Chief Officer for Childrens Services: Jo Olsson

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972: LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

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