

Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee: Report of the Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group meeting of Thursday 25th July 2024

Report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

1) Recommendation

That the Committee be asked to:

- (a) accept this report as an accurate record of the issues explored in the meeting ensuring transparency in scrutiny activities.
- (b) Any learning as a result of the meeting is shared by the Members who attended the meeting on behalf of the Committee.

2) Background / Introduction

2.1 The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Joint Scrutiny Group is an informal meeting of representative Scrutiny Members from Cornwall Council, Devon County Council, Somerset Council, Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council and has been established to maintain a strategic overview of the activity and performance of Adopt South West, the RAA for Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay, and report any significant findings or recommendations back to individual local authority scrutiny committees.

2.2 This report outlines the topics covered at the Group's meeting on 25th July 2024, highlights the key points raised during discussion, and details any agreed actions or recommendations back to the individual local authority Scrutiny Committees.

3) Meeting summary

3.1 Terms of Reference

Charlie Fisher, Scrutiny Officer, introduced the revised Terms of Reference document for the Group. The terms of reference needed revising due to the inclusion of Cornwall Council to the group, the recognition that Somerset Council was now a unitary authority and not a County Council and some changes to the names of Scrutiny Committees amongst the Member authorities.

It was felt that the document needs to be strengthened in terms of strategic accountability of the RAA and the strategic oversight and influence of the Group. It was agreed that the draft terms of reference would be referred back to the Adopt South West Strategic Board for reconsideration. It was noted that this was timely since the Strategic Board is undertaking a wider review of the Inter-agency Agreement that governs Adopt South West.

Actions:

- (a) That the Terms of Reference document would be re-circulated to Members after the meeting.
- (b) That the Terms of Reference be referred to the Adopt South West Strategic Board to review as part of a wider review of accountability of the strategic overview of Adopt South West.

3.2 Adopt South West Annual Report 2023/24

Amanda White, Head of Service - Adopt South West, presented the [Adopt South West Annual Report 2023/24](#) to the Members of the Group.

Key areas highlighted in the report:

- Adopt South West started on 1st April 2018 as the Regional Adoption Agency for Devon, Plymouth, Somerset and Torbay. There are now 33 RAAs across the Country. Cornwall Council and the Isles of Scilly have been part of the RAA since 1st April 2024.
- **The children** - By year end, there were 196 children with a plan for adoption, an increase of 15.2%. Of the 109 children placed in 23/24, 91.3% (100) were placed with Adopt South West adopters, 8% higher than the previous year.
- **Timeliness** – the average number of days between a placement order being made and a child being formally matched to their adoptive family fell from 214 to 206 days, although Devon’s timeliness as a local authority rose from 147 to 269 days.
- **Early Permanence** – This year saw a national focus on Early Permanence (or Foster for Adopt) following the launch of the Early Permanence National Standards in February 2023. The principle of this is that the first placement is the only placement. Adopt South West has seen improved performance to 42.4% of children placed under early permanence regulations, compared to 36.15% in 2022/23 and 21% nationally in 2023/24. The Head of Service reported that this means Adopt South West is the highest performing area.
- **Adopters** – Despite active marketing, the recruitment of adopters fell 19% last year from 81 to 67 adopters. National data also shows a decline in applicants for adoption. The Head of Service highlighted that potential adopters were coming forward and being interested and there was only 6% lower attendance at information events. However, it was the Head of Service’s view that potential adopters were taking longer to make a decision about their adoption journey and as such the service is trying to analyse this to get feedback on potential adopters. In 2024/25 so far, the service has seen an increase of 27 households and the Head of Service was optimistic that performance would improve in the current year.

- The adopter gap, (the number of children needing families against the number of families available) slightly decrease on last year, from 29% to 27%, with 43% of our children who had been waiting 3 months placed.
- **Marketing and Recruitment** – The service has continued the ‘Think Again’ campaign, appealing to prospective fosters who had previously considered adoption but had decided it wasn’t the right time.
- **Non-agency adoptions** – The number of adoption orders for partner adoption assessments rose from 10 in 2022/23 to 28 in 2023/24.
- **Family breakdown** – The numbers of family breakdowns are coming down, 7 in 2022/23 to 5 in 2023/24. The Head of Service commented that the Service sometimes do not know about family breakdowns because there are a number of differentials within ‘family breakdowns’ outside of the adoption simply not working. However, nationally the percentage of family breakdowns is low.
- **Adoption Support** - Head of Service highlighted it is the priority for the service and the Strategic Plan to improve the post-adoption support to be earlier. There have been an increasing number of referrals for Adoption Support from 332 in 2019/20 to 1068 in 2023/24. A significant development in Adoption Support has been the introduction of a Triage Team, a dedicated team of social workers and family practitioners who act as the first point of contact for people referred to the service for support.
- **Maintaining relationships** - Adopt South West co-ordinated 3113 exchanges between birth and adoptive families in the year. There were 10,086 letterbox exchanges, the exchange of information between the adoptive family and members of the birth family.
- **Finance** – In 2023/24 the Service had a net underspend of £551,804 against their budget of £5.430m, received from the constituent local authorities. This underspend was returned to the local authorities. In 2024/25 the Service has a budget of £6.588m, with a revised funding formula to reflect the addition of Cornwall.
- **Focus for 2024/25** – The focus for the following year reflects the expansion with Cornwall and a need to ensure practice and process alignment with Cornwall. The key themes are Voice and Influence, Maintaining significant relationships and Timely adoption support.

Discussion with Members included:

- Members welcomed the report and improved performance across the service.
- Members welcomed the improved performance of 91% of children placed with Adopt South West Adopters and improved performance with Early Permanence. Members asked what Adopt South West did to improve the performance? The Head of Service highlighted national and regional conferences that covered Early Permanence and key research which highlighted the need to ensure Early Permanence. The service

also reviewed family finding for the children who were waiting based on the think again campaign, asking potential adopters to think again about their situation and utilise adopters who were waiting for children.

- Members welcomed inter agency adoptions and what more can Adopt South West do to improve performance? The Head of Service commented on the peer reviews across local authorities and the RAA. Cornwall joining the RAA meant learning could be shared amongst the other local authorities. In addition, there were Early Permanence champions within each local authority within adoption and fostering services.
- If Early Permanence improvements had positively impacted avoiding family breakdowns? The Head of Service responded there wasn't the evidence for this yet but the service has better relationships in families and children having a better understanding of who has looked after them. The service has seen positive outcomes where adopters have bridged children back to birth families and gave an example of this to Members.
- If the cost of living crisis has had an impact on the number of adopters coming forward? The Head of Service highlighted the Adoption UK's [Adoption Barometer report](#) and stated there is a lack of confidence in people's personal circumstances with adopters not being able to or financially ready to adopt and sustain an adoption.
- Members asked about the process to become an adopter and if there was a drop-out rate? Notwithstanding the need for checks and processes to be stringent, the Head of Service commented that generally, potential adopters do not drop out midway through the process because they were committed to adoption. The Head of Service highlighted there is a 6 month target for the process, and that ASW's performance was good on this timeliness. In recent years, families with more complexities are coming forward as potential adopters which do mean more checks and references are needed.

Actions:

- (a) Members welcomed the Adopt South West Annual Report 2024/24 and noted the Adopt South West Strategy 2024/27.

3.3 Work Planning / Future Meetings

It was agreed that when the Strategic Board had reconsidered the joint scrutiny group's terms of reference, and any amendments to the inter-agency agreement, that they should be brought for consideration to the joint scrutiny group.

Actions:

- (a) That the Chair would convene a further meeting in 2024 to consider the final Terms of Reference and Inter Agency Agreement.
- (b) That the next meeting of the Joint Scrutiny Group to review the Annual Report be chaired and hosted by Somerset Council in around 12 months time (July 2025).

4) Options / Alternatives

The report is the summary of a Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group meeting. Scrutiny does not make decisions and this report does not propose any alternatives.

5) Consultations / Representations / Technical Data

As above, there are no specific considerations in regard to consultations, representations and technical data in this report.

6) Strategic Plan

The alignment of all Scrutiny activity with the strategic plan is detailed on the Scrutiny work programme. The issues raised in the report and the benefit of developing member knowledge and the 'critical friend' challenge of Scrutiny contribute to the Council achieving its strategic plan.

Improving Member knowledge on key issues contributes to the Council's commitment to being a trust, inclusive and innovative Council. It ensures good decision making and that the Council listens and learns.

7) Financial Considerations

There are no specific financial considerations in this report.

8) Legal Considerations

There are no specific legal considerations in this report.

9) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

There are no specific environmental impact considerations in this report.

10) Equality Considerations

There are no specific equality considerations in this report.

11) Risk Management Considerations

The activity of Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Groups contributes to the mitigations for:

Ineffective Member Scrutiny

defined as: 'Due to ineffective scrutiny, the level and quality of service management may drop, leading to financial mismanagement or harm to staff and/or citizens and reputational damage e.g. Grenfell.

Member Effectiveness

defined as: 'Inadequate member effectiveness due to a lack of training, support and knowledge leads to a lack of challenge to corporate officers and/or poor decision making,

resulting in a negative effect on the County's citizens (poor value for money, poor service delivery, harm, etc).'

12) Summary / Conclusions / Reasons for Recommendations

The report outlines the topic(s) covered at the RAA Joint Scrutiny meeting of Thursday 25th July 2024, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

The report is formally reported to the Children's Scrutiny Committee in the interests of openness, transparency and good decision making.

Maria Price

Director of Legal and Democratic Services

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Organisational Development, Workforce & Digital Transformation:
Councillor Andrew Saywell

Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers

Background Paper – NIL

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Appendix - Attendance

Scrutiny Members

Cornwall Council: Councillor Peter Guest

Devon County Council: Councillors Tracy Adams (Chair) and Philip Sanders

Plymouth City Council: Councillor Zoe Reilly

Somerset Council: Councillor Evie Potts-Jones and Councillor Frances Nicholson
(substitute for Councillor Leigh Redman)

Torbay Council: Councillor John Fellows

Other attendees

Steve Liddicott, Deputy Director of Children's Health and Wellbeing (Devon County Council)

Amanda White, Head of Service - Adopt South West (Devon County Council)

Ben Davies, Service Director – Children and Family Services (Cornwall Council)

Charlie Fisher, Scrutiny Officer (Devon County Council)

Fiona Abbott, Senior Democratic Services Officer (Somerset Council)

Teresa Buckley, Democratic Services Team Leader (Torbay Council)