

Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee: Report of the Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group meeting of Tuesday 18th February 2025

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 a meeting of representative Scrutiny Members from Cornwall Council (CC), Devon County Council (DCC), Plymouth City Council (PCC), Somerset Council (SC), and Torbay Council (TC), those Councils which form Adopt South West (ASW). The main focus of the RAA Joint Scrutiny Group is to maintain a strategic overview of the activity and performance of Adopt South West across the RAA area 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 Tuesday 18th February 2025, 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 Welcome and introductions

Cllr Adams welcomed Members and Officers to the meeting.

3.2 Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting, 25th July 2024, were agreed.

3.3 Terms of Reference

Charlie Fisher, Scrutiny Officer, and Steve Liddicott, Deputy Director for Children's Health and Wellbeing introduced the revised Terms of Reference document for the Group.

The meeting on 25th July 2024 had agreed to review the Terms of Reference. Revisions included widening and clarifying the optional attendees and clarifying the frequency of meetings and reporting mechanisms.

Recommendation:

- (a) That the Terms of Reference are endorsed by the Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group.

3.4 Overview and role of Adopt South West

Amanda White, Head of Service - Adopt South West, and Becky Thompson, Divisional Director of Safeguarding, presented to Members on an overview of and the role of Adopt South West as a regional adoption agency. The presentation covered the role of Regional Adoption Agencies, Adoption England, how Regional Adoption Agencies work together, what good practice looks like and how the service is meeting those indicators, performance and recent developments and improvements.

Key areas highlighted in the presentation:

- [Adopt South West](#) (ASW) is one of 32 Regional Adoption Agencies who work to improve the recruitment of adopters, help children to move into their permanent families as promptly as possible and offer robust adoption support across the wider region.
- [Adoption England](#) is a Department for Education funded national collaboration of RAAs working to improve adoption practice and develop support across England.
- ASW work pan-regionally with other RAAs to improve practice.
- Devon County Council host ASW, and an inter-authority agreement ensures governance through the Operational and Strategic Boards.
- What does good practice look like in regional adoption agencies? The key indicators include: the sufficiency of adopter numbers and diversity to meet the needs of children with plans for early permanence and adoption; Supporting children moving into their adoptive families as promptly as possible and offering robust and timely adoption support across the region for adopted children/young person/adopters/birth families/adopted families.

The Head of Service also provided an overview of the service's performance dashboard and an explanation of the performance measures. Key indicators highlighted included:

- Whilst there has been national decrease in adopters, ASW saw an 11% rise in adopter enquiries and 6% rise in applications to adopt. Whilst most relate to Cornwall joining ASW, the figure has still increased excluding Cornwall.
- The adopter approval rate has increased, with a projected figure of 94 by the end of the year, an increase from 68 approvals made in 2023/24.
- 109 children placed year to date (2024/25), with 93 (86%) placed with ASW families.
- In 2023/24, nationally ASW was the best performing RAA for children achieving adoption from early permanence placements. In 2024/25, despite a slight drop, ASW expect to still continue to be the best performers.

Recent key developments since the last meeting and the Annual Report included:

- The Triage team has been expanded.
- Peer mentoring support for adopters in early placements has been established.
- Implementation of a focused team for maintaining relationships, staying in touch, letterbox and direct contact.
- An adoption experienced adult has joined the Strategic Board.
- Two adopted young adults have joined the adopted panel to improve the voice and influence of children and young people who have been adopted.
- Birth mothers and a birth father than provided video training for adopters and staff.

Discussion with Members included:

- The Chair welcomed the comprehensive overview given and the service's performance and asked that her appreciation is passed on the staff in the service.
- The importance of the relationship between ASW and the constituent local authorities, and their roles and responsibilities for adoption.
- Effective relationships with local authority fostering services – the service links to the regional fostering hub, deliver training to fostering teams about adoption and work together for marketing services and supporting families and staff.
- How the service's good performance has been maintained? Officers commented that this was due to effective collaboration across the local area, longer term planning, marketing, effective working between fostering and adoption services, good performance and ensuring the right outcomes for the child/young person and a consistent and experienced workforce across a number of years.
- Members recalled from the previous meeting that ASW reported an underspend in their budget. Officers reported that there was an operational underspend on staffing due to inherited vacant posts from Cornwall. The service has worked to ensure the effective recruitment of staff with the right skills. The service has an interagency budget which is used to place children outside of the RAA area. As placement timings are unpredictable interagency spend is not able to be definitive and the budget has flexibility to respond to the needs of children to be placed throughout the year.
- The progress of the #thinkagain campaign and improvements to the time between approval and placements.

3.5 Progress against the Adopt South West Annual Report and Strategic Plan

The Chair was content that this item had been covered in the previous item's presentation and discussion.

3.6 Election of Chair and Host Authority for 2025/26

Members discussed the Chair and Host Authority for 2025/26 municipal year and it was clarified what the role entails, the responsibilities and workload.

Members and Lead Members agreed to have a conversation with their Scrutiny Chair and Vice Chair to ascertain if they could host the Joint Scrutiny Group meetings in 2025/26.

Actions:

- (a) That the Chair and Scrutiny Officer (DCC) would liaise with the Joint Scrutiny Group after the meeting to determine the Chair and Host Authority for 2025/26.

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 Tuesday 18th February 2025, 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

Contact for enquiries:

Name: Charlie Fisher (Scrutiny Officer)

Telephone: 01392 383681 or charlie.fisher@devon.gov.uk

Address: G31, County Hall, Exeter.

Appendix – Meeting Details and Attendance

The meeting was held on Tuesday 18th February 2025 via Teams. The meeting began at 10:01am and ended at 11:15am.

Members present:

Cornwall Council: Councillor Peter Guest

Devon County Council: Councillor Tracy Adams (Chair)

Somerset Council: Councillor Evie Potts-Jones

Torbay Council: Councillor Yvonne Twelves

Apologies given: Councillors John Fellows (TC), Leigh Redman (SC) and James Mustoe (CC).

Other invited attendees and Scrutiny/Democratic Services support:

- Amanda White, Head of Service, Adopt South West (DCC)
- Steve Liddicott, Deputy Director of Children's Health and Wellbeing (DCC)
- Becky Thompson, Divisional Director of Safeguarding (TC)
- Councillor Heather Shearer, Chair of the Adopt South West Strategic Board and Lead Member for Children, Families and Education (SC)
- Councillor Andrew Leadbetter, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools (DCC)
- Councillor Nick Bye, Cabinet Member for Children's Services (TC)
- Councillor Jemima Laing – Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications (PCC)
- Charlie Fisher, Scrutiny Officer (DCC)
- Aayushi Sharma, Senior Democratic Services Officer (SC)