

DRAFT SCRUTINY BRIEFING

Regionalising Adoption - Regional Adoption Agencies

February 2016



Background

1. Adopt South West

Adopt South West¹ launched in April 2015 as a co-operative regional adoption partnership which is not a legal entity or agency. The adoption agencies in the Adopt South West partnership are Barnardo's, Devon County Council, Families for Children, Plymouth City Council, Torbay Council and Somerset County Council. Cornwall Council were also formally asked to join by Plymouth on behalf of Adopt South West members in Summer 2015. Cornwall have replied formally to say that they do not wish to join.

Agencies in Adopt South West co-operate in marketing and recruitment of adopters and the running of information days and training events for adopters. We are working to develop the support available for adopters and improve the matching of children together. We have also run a conference together, Adoption Activity Days and marketing campaigns.

2. Regional Adoption Agencies

The [Education and Adoption Bill](#), if passed, will give the Secretary of State a new power to direct one or more named local authorities to make arrangements for any or all of their adoption functions to be carried out on their behalf by one of the local authorities named, or by another agency. The bill completed its third reading in the House of Lords on 8th February 2016.

The proposed functions which can be specified are: the recruitment, assessment and approval of prospective adopters; decisions about which prospective adopters a child should be matched with; and the provision of adoption support services.

In Summer 2015 the Department of Education released a paper called [Regionalising Adoption](#) which asked for expressions of interest in moving towards regional adoption agencies. Local authorities were invited to bid for a grant from £4.5million of funding and Plymouth led a successful bid on behalf of Adopt South West.²

Government's stated aim is to reduce the number of adoption agencies from the current national total of 180, as well as improving practice and speeding up adoptions. The Department of Education wants to make sure adoption agencies stop the practice of seeking

¹ and

² Adopt South West is a partnership of adoption agencies from across the region that was formally launched on April 22nd 2015, building on previous co-operation that was already happening. The adoption agencies in Adopt South West are Barnardo's, Devon County Council, Families for Children, Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council. Somerset County Council has just joined Adopt South West. Agencies in Adopt South West co-operate in marketing and recruitment of adopters and the running of information days and training events for adopters. We are working to develop the support available for adopters and improve the matching of children together. We have also run a conference together, Adoption Activity Days and marketing campaigns. This is the Adopt South West website - <http://www.adoptsouthwest.org.uk/>The joint Adopt South West telephone number is 0800 0832227.

to first place an agencies own children with their own adopters because of potential delay for the child.

The D for E intention is that regional adoption agencies will lead to economies of scale, savings, access to a larger pool of adopters willing to take “hard to place” children, faster adoptions and opportunities to share good practice, and supervision. Nationally there are a number of consortia but very few merged services. Examples include Adopt Berkshire (4 Councils) and the Triboroughs (3 London boroughs.)

DfE has stated clearly that Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) have a central role to play in regional adoption agencies.

Adopt South West Regionalising Adoption Project team - progress

There are now 19 projects up and running nationally. Please see Appendix One for more details. We understand that over 130 local authorities and 20 (out of less than 30) VAAs are involved in one of the 19 Regional Adoption Agency projects.

An Adopt South West project team has started work on the options appraisal to determine what the local Regional Adoption Agency could look like, with the support of a Deloitte’s/Mutual Ventures coach provided by the Department of Education. The project team is currently led/co-ordinated by Plymouth and is working together from the Families for Children head office one day a week. (Families for Children is a local Voluntary Adoption Agency.) Plymouth has also set up a Plymouth focused project team.

In November 2015 the Adopt South West project team went to the Department of Education launch of the regionalising adoption project in London and met the other project teams from the rest of England. In January, February and March 2016 the team are attending DfE learning events about the options appraisal process.

The Department of Education have stated that they are open to different delivery models however they have made the following clear -

- There is an expectation RAAs will be more than a partnership or consortia arrangement.
- By law adoption functions must be carried out by adoption agencies - i.e. a Voluntary Adoption Agency or LA(s) registered with Ofsted.
- There is flexibility around geography and number of partners.
- But there is guidance as to the minimum size expected. The RAA should ideally have the ability to deal with 200+ children per year. (Plymouth currently carry out around 40 adoptions a year.)
- In a recent letter from Edward Timpson Minister’s have emphasised that they would like to see ambition and innovation and want to avoid agencies choosing an option too quickly because it is easiest to implement or agree on quickly, without careful consideration. Rather they would like to see ambitious sustainable change that delivers better outcomes for children.

Independent work is underway on benchmarking the performance of all six adoption agencies in Adopt South West and on stakeholder engagement.

The project is required by the DfE to deliver a transition plan which states the next steps the agencies will take together by the end of March 2015.

The People Children's and Young People's DMT have given the Plymouth staff on the project team a mandate to consider all options for the Plymouth City Council adoption service in the options appraisal. It has been noted that a recommendation could be considered a key decision. If so, then the recommendation would be submitted to Cabinet for approval at that point. The option appraisal is not completed, so it is not yet clear whether an option that involves a key decision will be recommended as yet.