

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

Subject:	Regional Adoption Agency
Committee:	Cabinet
Date:	13 th March 2018
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Beer
CMT Member:	Carole Burgoyne (Strategic Director)
Author:	Caroline Kirsopp, Head of Service Children Young People and Families
Contact details	Tel: 01752 306860 email: caroline.kirsopp@plymouth.gov.uk
Ref:	
Key Decision:	Yes
Part:	I

Purpose of the report:

The purpose of this business case is to outline the Devon County Council, Somerset County Council, Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council response to the Governments requirement for adoption agencies to come together and form Regional Adoption Agencies by forming the Adopt South West Regional Adoption Agency. Throughout this process Trade Unions and Staff have been up-dated and actively engaged with through wide and extensive communication; for example there is a regular updating newsletter and recently a staff event for all 4 regions where staff where able to begin networking.

The business case describes-

- the benefits of 4 Authorities coming together as a regional service;
- options considered for the RAA model and the preferred outcome;
- what this means for Devon as the host authority and the functions delegated to Devon;
- the staffing transferred to enable delivery of services, and the related budget;
- the apportionment of the budget across the 4 authorities & financial risk management;
- the core content of the legal Inter Authority Agreement required.

Approval of the business case by the Authoritys' Cabinets will enable transition from 4 separate adoption services to a single local authority hosted [Devon] Regional Adoption Agency by October 2018.

The business case describes the background and context of the National Regional Adoption Agency programme, outlining the models defined by the Department for Education and considered by the partner Local Authorities and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the subsequent selection of a Devon hosted model. The regional context is then set out describing the current Ofsted performance, scale of staffing and 2018/19 adoption budgets of the partner local authorities. The required budget for operation of the RAA is then outlined and a description of the variance to the Local Authority budgets and the management of the required set up costs.

The goals of the hosted RAA are outlined and then operationalised with clear targets described that are both transparent and measurable. There follows a description of constituent service elements delivered by the RAA and the treatment of existing contracts.

The supporting governance arrangements to maintain accountability and scrutiny are laid out together with the planned organisation of the RAA and staff employment arrangements.

The ability of RAA staff to operate as a single service across the region drives the need for technology solutions as well as a specific information governance agreement. There is a description of key principles adopted in defining appropriate office bases i.e. that retain the key interfaces with Child Care social workers, and that are accessible to the public for required meetings with potential adopters to support them through the Adoption journey.

The Corporate Plan 2016-2019:

Corporate Objectives	How the RAA aligns with the Corporate Plan
Pioneering Plymouth – we will be innovative by design, and deliver services that are more accountable, flexible and efficient.	The RAA’s vision is to deliver consistently good and innovative adoption practice that ensures improved life chances for children by drawing on the best practice delivered consistently across the region.
Caring Plymouth – we will work with our residents to have happy, healthy and connected communities where people lead safe and fulfilled lives.	Children are at the centre of this proposal. The emphasis is on improving their life chances through improved adopter recruitment, improved timeliness of placing children for adoption, more children achieving permanence through adoption and improved adoption support for adopters.

**Implications for Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:
Including finance, human, IT and land**

The financial impact of the recommendations are set out in the Part II report.

The RAA will be pooling resources, knowledge and expertise of the four local authorities in the partnership. This means at the least the best practice from across the region can be adopted and in practice further improvements developed. The RAA will also provide consistency to the adopter experience.

The outcomes required of the RAA are:

- Improved life chances for children
- Developing services with Adopters to achieve better outcomes for Children
- Reduced delays for children and adopters throughout the Adoption journey
- Taking what we do best and making it consistent across the region;
- Taking opportunities for innovative practice across the spectrum
- A cost-effective service for all Local Authorities
- Improved practice and support, regardless of the permanence option
- Improved support for Adopters, Birth Parents and their families
- Place children with families more effectively and with minimal disruption
- The RAA will work together with Voluntary Adoption Agencies, Adopters and Parents to improve practice

The achievement of these outcomes for children and adults affected by adoption will see benefits for each Local Authority. There will be benefits reflected in LAC performance and budgets and there will be a clear link to the Early Permanence agenda and strategies. The financial performance of the RAA and delivery of efficiencies will be overseen by the Governance Board.

Other Implications: e.g. Child Poverty, Community Safety, Health and Safety and Risk Management:

The development of the RAA will enable Plymouth adopted children to have access to the best possible adoption practice, shared across Devon, supporting them to maximize their life chances.

Equality and Diversity

Devon County Council have drafted an Equality Impact Assessment in their capacity as prospective host of the Regional Adoption Agency.

Recommendations and Reasons for recommended action:

Recommend that Cabinet –

1. approve business case;
 2. agree that DCC shall host the regional adoption agency for implementation 1st October 2018.
-

Alternative options considered and rejected:

Published work / information:

Not applicable.

Background papers:

Title	Part I	Part II	Exemption Paragraph Number							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Draft Equality Impact Assessment	x									
The financial impact paper					x					

Sign off:

Fin	djn1718.228	Leg	30071/ag/ 8.3.18	Mon Off		HR	AM 080318
Originating SMT Member Alison Botham, Director for Children Services							
Has the Cabinet Member(s) agreed the contents of the report? Yes							

I.0 INTRODUCTION

I.1 National context

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. [The Adoption and Children Act 2002 makes provision for authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to join together to form Regional Adoption Agencies \(RAA\).](#)

Section 15 of the [Education and Adoption Act 2016](#) once fully in force 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 Government's view is that structural change will improve the process for children and adopters. Key elements will be:

- service delivery has at its heart innovation and practice excellence;
- highly skilled professionals who make high quality, evidence based decisions and do not tolerate delay for children in their care; matches are made without unnecessary delay;
- Regional Adoption Agencies provide a large pool of adopters for every child in need of a new family;
- where a match is not immediately available within the Regional Adoption Agency, the search is extended nationally without delay;
- every adoptive family has access to an on-going package of appropriate support with a right to a high quality, specialist assessment of need. This support is delivered from day one and continues throughout childhood whenever it is required;
- the voice of adopters and their children is at the heart of national and local policy decision making and delivery of services.

The DfE expects the Regional Adoption Agency programme to deliver consistently good and innovative adoption practice that ensures improved life chances for children.

The Adoption Leadership Board, who collate and analyse adoption statistics on behalf of the national adoption agencies, reported the following trends¹.

- * **Adoption numbers are falling.** Data suggest that the number of adoptions fell slightly between quarter 4 2015-16 and quarter 1 2016-17, from 1,120 to 1,060. 4,690 adoptions in 2015-16 is a decrease of 670 from 5,360 in 2014-15
- * Data suggests that the **number of new decisions has continued to fall** from 1,850 in quarter 2 2013-14 to 1,080 in quarter 1 2016-17, a decrease of 42%
- * Quarterly data also suggest **new placement orders granted have continued to fall** from 1,630 in quarter 2 2013-14 to 890 in quarter 1 2016-17, a decrease of 45%
- * Projected uplifts suggest that new decisions and placement orders may have plateaued between quarter 4 2015-16 and quarter 1 2016-17
- * The number of **adopter registrations decreased** by 14% between quarter 4 2015-16 and quarter 1 2016-17, from 840 to 730. The number of adopter approvals increased by 1% from 700 to 710.

Alongside the Regional Adoption Agency agenda, the national challenges facing the sector outlined through analysis by the National Adoption Leadership board are:

¹ ALB Headline Measures and Business Intelligence Ref: DFE-00038-2017 Accessed 16/03/2017 at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584616/ALB_Business_Intelligence_Quarter_1_2016_to_2017.pdf

- Since September 2013, the number of decisions for adoption has almost halved because of the impact of recent court cases.
- The number of Placement Orders granted has also declined nationally. The Government argues this “highlights weaknesses in the way permanence decisions are being made, and raises questions about whether social workers are being supported to develop the skills and knowledge they need to make and defend robust professional judgments”.
- Workforce development and close work between the Regional Adoption Agencies, the children’s social care teams, and Local Family Justice Boards will be key to addressing this issue, and to the success of Regional Adoption Agencies.

1.2 Regional Context

The [Adopt South West](#) co-operative regional adoption partnership was launched in April 2015. The adoption agencies in the Adopt South West partnership were Devon County Council, Plymouth City Council, Torbay Council, Somerset County Council, Barnardo’s and Families for Children. The scope of the Adopt South West partnership has been the co-operation and co-delivery in marketing and recruitment of adopters and the running of information days and training events for adopters to develop the support available for adopters and improve the matching of children. All other adoption services remained within the discrete organisations.

2.0 CURRENT PERFORMANCE

It is not possible to compare the performance of the group of 4 Local Authorities to national performance more recently than 2015/16 due to the way that the National Adoption Leadership Board reports, current data is only available for 2015/16.

Across the Adopt South West region, between 2012 and 2017, there has been a 43% increase in the number of looked after children to 2,692 and a 31% increase in the number of adoptions; however, in line with national trends the number of adoptions over the past 3 years are declining, this is evidenced in Table 1 below that depicts the number of Children approved for placement and the number of Adopters approved over the past 4 years.

Table 1: Children approved for placement and number of adopters

Data for the region	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Children needing placements	165	139	150	140
Adopters approved	126	127	104	74

It is evident that there is more work to be done in the level of adoptions of Children needing placement, as performance has dropped consistently across the area since 2015. This is an example where best practice will be sought out, looked at for improvement and then become standard practice across the area.

Over the past 3 years the number of Looked after Children has continued to increase whilst the number of Looked after Children adopted has reduced by 4.13% returning to levels seen in 2013/14 from a peak in 2014/15. This is in line with government expectations that no more than 10% of Looked After Children be adopted, with the majority supported to remain in the birth family environment.

Table 2: Looked After Children adopted

	2015	2016	2017	% LAC adopted 3yr Variance
Plymouth	10.13 %	5.98%	7.30%	-2.83%
Devon	8.57%	3.72%	4.85%	-3.72%
Somerset	11.22 %	6.99%	4.67%	-6.55%
Torbay	6.56%	7.50%	3.58%	-2.98%
Total	9.26%	5.59%	5.13%	-4.13%

Statistically the region overall is performing better than 3 years ago and this trend will look to be continued.

Similar trends in statistical performance are being seen across the partners in the Adopt South West Region, however one of the key issues for the development of a RAA is the current differential in adoption performance across the Local Authorities with varying grades in Ofsted Inspection; Torbay, Plymouth and Somerset 'Require Improvement' and Devon is 'Good'. The Voluntary Adoption Agencies in the region perform well and will remain an important partner of the RAA.

It is clear there is a need to secure best practice and outcomes and share this across the region, whilst guarding against any deterioration in performance for individual agencies. This is a key outcome for the RAA.

3.0 OPTIONS CONSIDERED

The work began early in 2016 with an appraisal of the four models for a Regional Adoption Agency defined by Government, using the prescribed scoring tools. This was completed by the Director/ Heads of Service in Plymouth, Torbay, Somerset and Devon together with Families for Children and Barnardo's the leading Voluntary Adoption Agencies in the area and informed by engagement with adoption services staff, adopters and Adoption Panel Chairs.

The option preferred was a Single Local Authority Hosted Regional Adoption Agency with Devon identified as the most appropriate host. The submission to DfE for grant funding of the development of this solution by 1st April 2018 was accepted and £607,000 grant funding achieved for 2016/17 and 2017/18. The release of the allocation for 2017/18 was subject to acceptable progress being made by March 2017, this checkpoint was successfully achieved.

The Devon hosted model sees certain Adoption services transfer from Torbay Council, Plymouth City Council and Somerset County Council to Devon as the host of the Regional Adoption Agency. The "Adopt South West" brand has been retained as it is known and understood by adopters and the public; this was previously used for partnership arrangements between the local authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies for the purpose of marketing for, and recruitment of, Adopters that expired in March 2017.

Adopt South West is one of 19 such groups funded to achieve a Regional Adoption Agency, and one of the early decisions required was which delivery model to select. The DfE prescribed four possible options for a delivery model for a Regional Adoption Agency and provided a national scoring system

as a tool to aid discussions, the purpose of which was to examine the desirability, feasibility and viability of each option.

DfE Prescribed Options:

- 1. A Local Authority single host, on behalf of several Local Authorities e.g. Aspire, Dorset hosts services for three Local Authorities.
- 2. Joint Venture between Local Authorities; a new public sector owned Local Authority Trading Co. e.g. Achieving for Children, Kingston and Richmond's Children's Services
- 3. A new Voluntary Adoption Agency; possibly a Joint Venture with flexibility for public & third sector ownership, e.g. Entrust Schools Service in Staffordshire.
- 4. Existing Voluntary Adoption Agency; Local Authorities involved commission an existing Voluntary Adoption Agency to deliver the RAA, e.g. Coram.

4.0 RECOMMENDED OPTION

The six partners in the Adopt South West adoption agency partnership scored the benefits of each option against an agreed set of assessment criteria. This was completed by the Regional Adoption Agency project governance group, consisting of the Local Authorities Director/ Heads of Service, Executives of Families for Children and Barnardo's Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Chaired by the Director of Children's Services from Somerset.

Following consideration of each possible model, the preference was for Option 1: A Local Authority single host on behalf of several Local Authorities.

There has been consideration of this arrangement as an interim step to considering Option 2 further, however this has been further reflected upon drawing on others experience and DfE learning from the broader Nation RAA Programme in the autumn of 2017 and is not to be progressed.

The clear benefit of the Local Authority Hosted model identified would be to achieve the integration of the four Local Authority adoption services into one service, providing a best practice model that maintains and develops the current relationship with Voluntary agencies established in the delivery of the Adopt South West partnership.

Further to this, it was proposed that Devon County Council host the Regional Adoption Agency as Devon;

- Operates an adoption service rated Good;
- Has successfully innovated in many areas (e.g. foster to adopt, young people's engagement);
- Has the capacity to deliver given the size of the agency and the Local Authority;
- Has the experience of developing other services that Devon hosts for the region;
- Is centrally placed geographically.

The development of the RAA will not absolve each Local Authority of its statutory responsibilities but will allow for certain functions to be delegated to Devon as the host authority. Devon will then become responsible for the performance of those functions, on behalf of the partner Local Authorities, subject to the governance arrangements set out later in this document.

By becoming the 'host' Devon allows for all relevant functions and resources of each Local Authority to be transferred to it as host in 2018 and is responsible for ensuring effective arrangement for, and the transfer of, services to the RAA within the expected timescales as set out to the Department for Education.

5.0 DELEGATED FUNCTIONS

In summary after the required agreements are in place, the host (Devon) will become responsible for:

- Providing leadership for all adoption services across the RAA;
- Recruitment, assessment and training of adopters;
- Post Adoption support for all children within the designated boundaries;
- Oversight of Adoption Support Fund applications;
- Family finding and matching child with adopter;
- Agency Decision Maker for the adopters;
- Adoption support for any child that moves out the RAA area, for a period of 3 years;
- Quality assurance framework for adoption;
- Accountability for the adoption service aspect of a Local Authority Ofsted inspection framework.

The details of the functions being delegated to Devon by the other three authorities will be recorded in the Inter Authority Agreement.

6.0 VISION FOR THE DEVON HOSTED REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY

The Government's view is that structural change will improve the process for children and adopters. The Department for Education expects the Regional Adoption Agency programme to deliver consistently good and more innovative adoption practice that ensures improved life chances for children, through:

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

The stated vision agreed by the partner authorities for the RAA to achieve improved outcomes for children and families is to-

- Create a system where children are matched with the most suitable adopter as quickly as possible.
- Achieve sufficient scale of adopter recruitment to provide a pool of adopters, well prepared and well matched to the needs of children waiting.
- Offer sufficient, high quality adoption support services; effective short-term interventions, sign posting and enabling access to appropriate support

This will be achieved with a value for money service, that

- encourages innovation in practice;
- actively listens to and learns from children, adopters and staff to develop and improve the services provided;
- draws on the best practice across the region and make this the standard; and
- , delivers consistently across the region.

The RAA will create a system where recruitment takes place at a sufficient scale to provide a pool of 'adoption ready' adopters that are well matched to the needs of children waiting; that is large enough so that children are matched with the most suitable adopter as quickly as possible and that offers an adoption support service that is of a high quality.

7.0 OUTCOMES

The key outcomes set for the RAA reflect DfE intentions for the Regional Adoption Agencies programme, national performance standards as well by what a successful adoption service looks like as told by partners, children and adopters:

- Improved life chances for children;
- Developing services with Adopters to achieve better outcomes for Children;
- Reduced delays for children and adopters throughout the Adoption journey;
- Taking what we do best and making it consistent across the region;
- Taking opportunities for innovative practice across the spectrum;
- A cost-effective service for all Local Authorities;
- Improved practice and support, regardless of the permanence option;
- Improved support for Adopters, Birth Parents and their families;
- Place children with families more effectively and with minimal disruption;
- The RAA will work together with Voluntary Adoption Agencies, Adopters and Parents to improve practice.

The achievement of these outcomes for children and adults affected by adoption will see benefits for each Local Authority. There will be benefits reflected in LAC performance and budgets and there will be a clear link to the Early Permanence agenda and strategies.

Ofsted will not inspect the RAA as an entity but as the provider of services to the Local Authority being inspected.

Success measures

The RAA will target improved performance in areas that will reflect the vision and outcomes described for the RAA at national and local level. The planned process of building RAA data from the ground up will ensure robustness of data provided for national reporting purposes.

Each service area has a clear target set for Year 1 and a method of measurement identified and agreed. A further target is to improve the collection of key data to improve reporting across the service supporting managers in early identification of success or of areas for rapid improvement focus.

The outcomes described in section 5 have resulted in the following measures being selected-

- Improved timescales for second time adopter assessments;
- Higher conversion rate from enquiry to approval of prospective adopters;
- Early identification of children with potential adoption plans;
- More children placed on an Early Permanence (Fostering to Adopt) basis;
- Reduction in the number of children with their placement order revoked;
- More timely matching of approved adopters;
- Reduced length of time from adoption placement to adoption order for children;
- Improve the percentage of children adopted from care;
- Fewer Adoption de-registrations because a match has not been identified for the family;
- Fewer Adoption placement disruption;
- Increase in birth family referrals;
- Improved number and quality of adopters;
- More timely step-parent adoption assessments;
- Improvement in number of placements available for harder to place/ priority children;
- Improved performance measurement and management across the service.

These measures will deliver into the National Adoption Scorecard, Adoption Leadership Board records or act as quality makers for the RAA.

