

Children and Young People's Services Select Committee

11 September 2019

Creation of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)

Report by Director of Children's Services

Summary

To provide context and recommendations concerning the creation of a regional adoption agency (RAA), Adoption South East (ASE). The proposal is that West Sussex, Brighton and Hove, East Sussex and Surrey work together as a Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption South East, to provide adoption services for children and adults across the region from April 2020.

The focus for scrutiny

The Committee is asked to consider the attached draft Cabinet Member decision report and provide comment to the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People prior to the formal decisions being taken in September 2019.

Proposal

1. Background and Context

1.1 'Adoption - a Vision for Change' was published by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2016, with supporting legislation directing local authorities to form or join RAAs. Given well performing adoption services the 4 Directors from West Sussex, East Sussex, Surrey County Councils and Brighton and Hove City Council agreed to explore regionalisation at a future date, taking account of regional needs and geography.

1.2 In order to improve outcomes for children in care, the Coalition Government introduced *An Action Plan for Adoption: tackling delay* with legislative changes to the monitoring of the adoption process through an Adoption Scorecard. This set targets for local authorities to speed up the adoption process. In many authorities, those targets have not been met and the speed of adoption remains a local corporate parent and central government concern. The subsequent DfE paper, *Regionalising Adoption* proposed the move to regional adoption agencies in order to:

- Speed up matching
- Improve adopter recruitment and adoption support
- Reduce costs
- Improve the life chances of vulnerable children.

- 1.2 In October 2017, local authorities were advised of ministerial resolve to complete regionalisation by April 2020, prompting a successful application for grant funding, supporting subsequent project work.
- 1.3 By May 2019, half of local authorities were already part of live RAAs, with remaining projects working to going live by April 2020.

2. Proposal

- 2.1 An RAA to be known as Adoption South East (ASE) is formed between Brighton and Hove City Council and East Sussex, Surrey and West Sussex County Councils.
- 2.2 Delegated responsibility is given to the Director of Children's Services and Lead Member to enter into a Member's Agreement with the above councils.
- 2.3 Approval for transfer of the adoption service budget to the RAA from April 2020.

3. Resources

- 3.1 The Cabinet Member decision report sets out the resource implications; please see Appendix A.

Factors taken into account

4. Issues for consideration by the Select Committee

- 4.1 The Committee is asked consider the attached draft Cabinet Member decision report, which has been informed by a period of engagement with stakeholders. Issues members may wish to explore include;
 - a) The effectiveness of the consultation/engagement process with stakeholders and service users.
- 4.2 Stakeholder engagement events have been held with staff with feedback demonstrating enthusiasm for developing closer working, but also understandable anxieties about change. Adopter Champions are supporting consultation with adopters/prospective adopters acting as a bridge between the RAA project and service users to develop an engagement strategy. Directors were unanimous in recommending that the RAA should involve minimal change to employment arrangements for approximately 100 staff. It is therefore proposed that adoption service staff will remain employed by sovereign councils on existing terms and conditions, and when vacancies arise in the future these would be recruited to by the sovereign council where the position arises. Human Resource (HR) advice confirms staff may be managed on a day to day basis by colleagues employed by another local authority, subject to the partnership agreement. HR support would be

provided by Orbis for East Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove Council employees, and West Sussex and Surrey County Councils would be supported by their own HR departments.

- b) What the consultation analysis tells us and how it should inform the decision-making process. How have responses differed (e.g. service users, service providers, district/borough councils)
- 4.3 A partnership (Orbis style) model was considered. However this would not confer legal entity status unless established as a Local Government Trading Company. Adopting a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) hosted model was discounted given limited VAA presence across the region, meaning the recommendation is that the RAA is hosted by one of the local authorities on behalf of the 4 members. Given stable senior management and corporate services it is recommended East Sussex is well placed to host, for which a charge would apply to the RAA.
- 4.4 West Sussex HR are consulting with senior managers from the Fostering and Adoption Service; this is because currently post adoption support is undertaken by the Special Guardianship and Adoption Support Team which provides Special Guardianship support alongside Adoption Support. There is a need to 'disaggregate' this team with part of the current team moving to the RAA and part remaining within the local authority.
- c) The County Council's statutory responsibilities and those of partners and other agencies, and how these have informed the proposals.
- 4.5 Statutory responsibilities for looked after children would continue to be held by the member local authorities, with family finding undertaken by the RAA which would also undertake adopter recruitment, assessment and support.
- 4.6 The RAA would also provide post adoption support services and offer a non-agency adoption service, in accordance with a detailed service specification.
- d) What impact assessment has been carried out and any planned mitigations, bearing in mind the Councils public sector equality duty and other responsibilities identified in the decision reports.
- 4.7 A preliminary equality impact assessment has been completed by Suzanne Chambers; Adoption South East Project Lead.
- 4.8 Some West Sussex staff will not transfer to ASE as some resource for Special Guardianship support is required to remain within the local authority. Some West Sussex staff may not transfer to ASE if there are not like for like job descriptions, or if there are fewer jobs in ASE than in the current WS structure.
- e) Timetable for delivery of proposals.
- 4.9 A Head of Service would be recruited (by East Sussex County Council) from September 2019 to shape service design and delivery. This post (and any related support) would be funded by the RAA and the Head of Service would

be jointly accountable to the 4 member authorities through the Executive Board.

- 4.10 The RAA is scheduled to go live on 1st April 2020; the plan is for adoption recruitment and assessment, alongside the core offer for post adoption support, to work uniformly across ASE from this date, with plans for continuing the post adoption offer as phase 2.
 - f) Plans to monitor the impact of the proposals to include service users, their families and carers and current service providers.
- 4.11 The adopter champions will continue their engagement with service users and report back to Project and Executive Boards for RAA. Continued staff engagement events across the RAA are planned. There are monthly staff bulletins shared with the staff groups. For West Sussex, senior managers are working together with HR to ensure that a clear timeline for decisions for Special Guardianship and Adoption Support staff is provided.
 - g) Plans for future partnership working with strategic partners.
- 4.12 A full RAA service structure would be agreed following in principle approval. Service structure is currently under discussion between Project Board and Executive Board with view to a decision at the end of September 2019.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 Proposals have been published in the County Council's Forward Plan of Key Decisions and each of the draft Cabinet Member reports sets out the methodology and process of engagement with stakeholders and elected members.

6. Risk Management Implications/Other Options Considered/Equality Duty/Social Value/Crime Disorder Implications/Human Rights Implications

- 6.1 These sub headings are addressed in the individual draft Cabinet Member decision report (Appendix A).

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