

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Corporate Director for People

to
Cabinet

on
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Services &
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Regional Adoption Agency Update Report

**Department for People Scrutiny Committee – Executive Councillor:
Councillor James Courtenay**

A Part 1 Public Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To report on the current position of the Regional Adoption Agency activity.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the report be noted and agreed.

3. Background

- 3.1 In June 2015 the Government released a document entitled Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA). This was produced speedily and was a significant change to the current delivery of adoption services. .

This paper introduced the concept of large Regional Adoption Agencies, running adoption services for a number of local authorities. The document focused on Coram Cambridge as an ideal model for adoption services nationally. This is a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) created between Cambridgeshire County Council and Coram. It is a stand-alone VAA outside of both authorities but with a leadership team from both. It is financially independent of each but reliant on them for certain aspects of the adoption service.

Whilst there were significant concerns expressed, it became quickly clear that it was anticipated that the programme would move forward and that legislation would come into force to enable the government to hold ultimate control over how the plans progressed.

On the 11th August 2015, the DfE produced a further document regarding regionalisation, which presented a slight variation on the original proposals. This new document stated that the expression of interests should be:

- Clear and ambitious about the improvement in outcomes they want to achieve for children, and have a realistic rationale for how to deliver improvement
- Will deliver significant consolidation of current services and operate at a significantly greater scale than currently
- Will deliver all adopter recruitment, matching and support functions unless there is an exceptional reason not to
- Have the potential to significantly improve practice, or to spread practice excellence to new areas
- Will develop and/or spread innovation in the sector, both in terms of the delivery model envisaged and the practices which will be developed
- Have the potential to generate wider learning that will contribute to the transformation of the adoption sector.

Over the past year considerable work has been undertaken to identify the RAA grouping nationally and Southend have been working with Hertfordshire, Suffolk, Essex, Luton and Adoption Plus (VAA) to create Adopt East RAA.

Over the past nine months the project board has met on a monthly basis with telephone conferences in addition where required. We have during that time agreed in principle a delivery model for Adopt East, as a shared service. An options appraisal was completed, with the consultants who undertook this piece of work looking at the national as well as local position drawing on lessons learned and gathering information regarding delivery models and good practice. They considered the adopters journey and met directly with adopters from across Adopt East.

Following this work it was intended that a business case would be taken to each LA cabinet around June/July 2016 however since then the situation has changed and the timescales extended due to funding reductions.

Work streams are continuing to develop, identifying quick wins that can be implemented early and scoping the next phase of design. The academy of best practice work stream is planning the programme of work to develop the academy, including stakeholder engagement and the first learning and engagement events.

The Adopt East adopter working group is up and running, being facilitated by Adoption UK and represented on the project board

Work streams have been set up to look at:

- Academy of best practice
- Family finding and matching
- Stakeholder engagement
- Adopter training and support

Adopt East have already implemented:-

- Shared child profiling events and matches are emerging across the region as a result
- A jointly commissioned service for inter-country adoption services with the IAC, which represents much better value than individual commissioning
- An Adopt East shared area on Adoption Link
- Shared register for approved adopters

Our aim has been to maintain the high quality of the Southend Adoption Service whilst meeting government requirements.

4. Other Options

- 4.1 The functions undertaken by the adoption agency are statutory requirements. In April 2014, Southend became a member of the East Anglian Adoption Consortium, following the ending of the Partners in Adoption Consortium. With however the new Regional Adoption Agency activity which was set up in 2015, this consortium ceased to exist and since that time, Southend has been a part of the activity of the Adopt East Regional Adoption Agency.
- 4.2 The Adopt East Regional Adoption Agency activity consists of Southend, Essex, Suffolk, Hertfordshire, Luton and Adoption plus.
- 4.3 The DfE remain clear that they intend to drive through the Regionalisation Programme, although with the change in Government and more recent EU changes, it remains unclear at this time as to exactly what this programme will ultimately look like.

5. Reasons for Recommendations

- 5.1 The DfE continues to drive forward the Regional Approach to adoption, whilst reducing the funding available for this. At this point the report is to ensure that Members are aware of the work being undertaken and the potential impact on Southend for future delivery of their adoption service.

6. Corporate Implications

- 6.1 Contribution to Council's Vision & Corporate Priorities

Southend adoption service delivers a high quality service to Southend children and families and during the recent OFSTED inspection was deemed "good". Recent scorecard activity shows the adoption service to be performing in the top ten authorities in the country.

Any change in governance of the adoption service, could lead to a decline in the service outcomes as Southend performs at a higher level than the other authorities within Adopt East. Any change will need to be closely monitored.

There is serious concern that the proposals will isolate all or some of the adoption process from other mainstream children's services which may then lead to delays in early planning, which currently is very strong in Southend

6.2 Financial Implications

The Adopt East partners submitted a transition plan to the DfE in April 2016, with a proposed plan and associated funding requirements. The DfE responded to all projects in June, having revised their approach to the regional adoption agency programme. Instead of funding all projects to the extent requested in their transition plans, the DfE decided to progress 5 demonstrator projects and ask the remaining 14 projects to refocus their efforts away from structure towards operational practice. Adopt East is focussing on achieving excellent practice throughout the adoption services and working in a more joined-up and collaborative way with our partners to improve outcomes for children and families across our region. The activity relating to setting up a new joint vehicle for the adoption agency has been put on hold, pending the learning from the demonstrator projects. This means that there will be no organisational changes proposed at this time.

It should however be noted, that should plans progress with the delivery model as proposed, there could be additional costs to Southend to enable a joint venue for Adopt East and additional costs in respect of IT services and management structure. If a new delivery model progresses the funding of this will need to be considered at that point in time. Even if no change occurs to the delivery model, there are additional costs associated to the Adopt East Board, however these are minimal and mostly involve time rather than costs and would be met within the existing resources of the service

6.3 Legal Implications

The legal entity is still to be determined, but probably to be either local authority hosted or a joint venture. The DfE preferred model appeared initially to be for a completely new VAA to be set up, which would run adoption services on behalf of the Local Authority. At this stage Adopt East does not have a remit from any of the member authorities to move towards this as there are serious concern as to the impact on the local authorities should a new VAA fail to meet legal requirements as each local authority would maintain inspection and legal responsibility for the delivery of their adoption service.

6.4 People Implications

At this stage there are no clear implications for staff, however should Adopt East move forward at any stage with a joint service delivery, this will potentially have a huge impact on staff. Firstly, it may be that there will be a central hub developed which would mean staff physically moving and in addition would potentially have an impact on close working with mainstream children's services.

Dependent on the governance of the new RAA, there may ultimately be TUPE issues for staff; pension issues and differences in pay across the RAA to be resolved.

6.5 Property Implications

Should it be agreed that the new RAA will run on an actual hub and spoke model, as recommended by the consultation paper completed in early 2016, there may be implications for the procurement of a building regionally from which Adopt East will operate and the associated costs of this.

6.6 Consultation

The First Adopt East wider stakeholder event was held on the 8th March 2016 and proposals and issues raised at this event are being incorporated into the Adopt East design through the current active work streams.

In addition The Adopt East Board has the input of adoptive families directly, co-ordinated through Adoption UK to ensure that the adopters voice is at the forefront of any decisions made.

A further on-line consultation was undertaken in August 2016 with staff across the adoption journey, the results of which at this stage are not yet available.

6.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications

Adopt East covers a diverse geographical area and enables a wider choice of families for Looked after Children in Southend-on-Sea being placed for adoption. Every effort is made to match children and adopters in relation to culture, ethnicity and religion, but such factors are only one element of the matching process and do not take priority over the overall ability of a prospective adopter to meet the needs of a child.

6.8 Risk Assessment

Adopt East should continue to reduce the risk of not finding suitable adoptive families for children. Although not yet formally agreed as an adoption agency in its own right, considerable work has already been undertaken in ensuring joint registers for adopters and children to ensure the widest availability of placements both within the RAA and nationally.

There remains a risk that should Adopt East become a fully shared service with independent governance, any failure to deliver adoption services at the current level, would impact on Southend who will remain legally responsible for the delivery of their adoption service and the outcome of the delivery will impact on future inspections.

6.9 Value for Money

Effective quality assurance supports value for money within the service. Adopt East gives Southend-on-Sea a wider choice of families.

The regional negotiations and planning also looks at shared services such as Adoption Exchange days and Adoption Parties.

Funding available for the Regional Adoption programme has reduced in 2016/17 and as such progress towards a fully shared service has slowed down. At this stage it remains unclear as to the financial impact or savings potentially available, however initial thinking has been regionally that there are very limited savings to be made through this project, whereas they may well be some associated costs.

6.10 Community Safety Implications

None

6.11 Environmental Impact

None

7. Background Papers

Regionalising adoption June 2015, DFE

8. Appendices

None