

Update of the Establishment of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)

Executive Summary:

This paper sets out the development to date of the RAA (Adoption @ Heart) that Walsall MBC will join. It is a requirement of central government that all Local Authorities will be part of a regional adoption agency by 2020. Currently 35% of Local Authorities adoption service is delivered by an RAA.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board:

To note the progress made in the development to date of the Adoption @ Heart and the key components to the implementation of the project plan.

Recommendations:

That:

- To note the development of the RAA Service.
- To note the current risk to the implementation of the RAA.
- To note the decision in respect to the delivery arrangements

Background papers: None

Corporate Parenting Pledges

The vision is that Adoption@Heart is to find a permanent, stable family as swiftly as possible for all children who need it and as such it primarily relates to the pledge a good and safe place to live.

Resource and legal considerations:

Implementation costs including the appointment of project manager and service design lead are being covered by a specific time limited grant made available by Central Government.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

This development of the RAA links with the priority that councils service are efficient and that children have the best possible start, are safe from harm, happy and are learning well .

Citizen impact:

Central government are committed to Regional Adoption Agencies as means of speeding up matching and markedly improving the life chances of neglected and damaged children whilst improving adopter recruitment and adoption support. There is view that costs will be reduced utilising the economies of scale bought with the establishment of the RAA.

Environmental impact:

None known

Performance management:

Local Authority timeliness of decision making and placement of children for adoption and securing of an adoption order will remain unchanged. The recruitment, assessment and approval adopters will become the responsibility of the RAA- Adoption @Heart

Reducing inequalities:

This has been completed as part of the project plan. This focussed on the with specific adopter requirements for older children, BME children and children with additional needs.

Consultation:

As part of the project plan a number of consultation events have been undertaken with key stakeholders, including adopters, older adopter children, members of Walsall adoption service, panel chair and members and wider Children's Services.

Contact Officer:

Elizabeth Gosling
Interim Group Manager
Provider Service

elizabeth.gosling@walsall.gov.uk

1. Report

- 1.1 In order to achieve the best possible outcomes for those children and young people for whom it is decided that adoption would be the best route to permanence, the four Black Country local authorities and Sandwell Children's Trust agreed to establish a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) – Adoption@Heart.

The Collaborative Vision and Aim(s)

- 2.1 In line with Government requirement for Local Authorities to collaborate together to create regional Adoption Agencies, the Black Country Local Authorities/Trust decided to further develop their collaborative working in order to improve the adoption system so that the ultimate aim of all children with an adoption plan being able to find a loving, stable home, as quickly as possible is achieved. To support the achievement of this aim it is expected that the RAA will:
- ensure all adopters are fully prepared and supported
 - support birth parents to understand why adoption is best for their children.
- 2.2 The collaboration has been underpinned by two guiding principles;
- a. That looked after children and prospective adopters are advantaged by doing so, and
 - b. That a regional adoption service is demonstrably more efficient and flexible in delivering the service.
- 2.3 Those involved in the collaboration have shared the ambition to improve performance particularly;
- a. In reducing the time that children have to wait for adoptive placements
 - b. In improving the experience for prospective adopters from initial inquiry, through the assessment process, panel approval and placement matching and the delivery of post adoption support services.

3. Key Outcomes and Objectives of the RAA

- 3.1 In planning the new approach to adoption services in the Black Country, six overarching outcomes have been identified and agreed as follows:
- Outcome 1: Adopters are found to meet the needs of children with a plan for adoption
- Outcome 2: Adopted children move into a permanent stable family as swiftly as possible
- Outcome 3: Adopters are fully prepared and supported to sustain a stable family life
- Outcome 4: Birth parents are supported to understand why adoption is the plan for their children.
- Outcome 5: The Regional Adoption Agency is an efficient organisation
- Outcome 6: The Regional Adoption Agency attracts, retains and develops the people it needs to succeed

- 3.2 The RAA will share the local authorities'/trust's key objectives which are:
- a. To provide children with the right adopters at the right time, approving those equipped to meet the needs of children waiting.
 - b. To minimise changes of plan away from adoption
 - c. To reduce delay and improve timescales for matching and placement for all children – working with care planning processes in each LA to improve early identification / twin track planning and to achieve best practise and consistency across the region.
 - d. To improve earlier permanence planning using:
 - Concurrent Planning
 - Fostering for Adoption
 - e. To develop and implement innovative approaches to placing children with 'harder to place' characteristics e.g.
 - Linking children with adopters from enquiry stage onwards where appropriate
 - Thoroughly preparing child and family for placement
 - f. To increase placement choice from a larger pool of adopters
 - g. To reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown through timely and improved matching, preparation and adoption support.
 - By providing a range of pre and post adoption support services in conjunction with statutory and voluntary sector providers
 - By establishing effective working links with key partner agencies (e.g. schools and health providers)
 - By providing a wider range of support services for adoptive families which will promote placement stability and reduce disruption
 - h. To form strong and productive relationships with:
 - Adopters
 - Adoptees
 - Voluntary sector providers
 - Health and education
 - i. To ensure that customer feedback and the views of service users are obtained and considered in the development and future operation of the service
- 3.3 All activity in the RAA will be compliant with requirements set by legislation, regulation, national minimum standards and local procedures. The RAA will operate under an agreed performance management framework, be subject to inspection and auditing bodies.

4.. Governance Arrangements

- 4.1 The development of the Adoption @ Heart is overseen by Governance Board with members drawn from Senior Officers from the four Local Authorities and Trust. The Board brief is to oversee and make decisions in respect the timeline to going live, staffing arrangements, accommodation and the budget. As such the Board has been advised of the range of risks in respect to the transition to the RAA and measures that project team have put in place to mitigate these. This includes the financial viability of the RAA once it is established.

5. Service Context and Responsibilities

- 5.1 The successful delivery of the new approach to delivering adoption services in the Black Country will be dependent on a high level of joint working between LAs and the RAA.

- 5.2 Statutory responsibilities under the Adoption and Children Act (2002) for the delivery of certain adoption functions will be contracted out to the RAA. These are to

- Recruit, assess and support potential prospective adopters
- Work in close collaboration with the child's social worker in seeking a permanent placement for the child through adoption
- Assess, support and plan for children who are relinquished by their birth parents
- Assess, support and plan for children who have a parallel plan for adoption
- Assess and support parent/partner and family relatives who wish to adopt a child
- Assess and support those adults who are seeking to adopt from another country (inter-country adoptions)
- Provide counselling advice and information to adopted adults post 18.
- Provide Independent support to birth parents involved in proceedings.
- Manage and support Adoption Panels which make recommendations to approve prospective adopters and on the matching of individual children to adopters
- Provide professional advice on best practice and regulations to agency decision makers
- Provide a quality assurance role

6. Eligibility criteria

- 6.1 The RAA will be responsible for providing a service to:
- Children from the four Black Country local authority areas who require adoption
 - Adults who wish to adopt
 - All adoptive families living in the region eligible for adoption support
 - Adopted adults
 - Facilitate contact between adoptive and birth family members
 - Birth parents and former guardians eligible for adoption support

- Independent support to birth parents who risk losing their child to adoption

7. Proposed Service Model.

- 7.1 The Governance Board recently confirmed that the delivery model will be a hosted arrangement with Wolverhampton being the host Local Authority. Staff will be transferred to the RAA via TUPE. The Service will be organised by function with a dedicated team for recruitment and assessment, a team family finding (including matching) and post adoption support team.