

Report of Director of Children's Services

Report to Executive Board

Date: 27th July 2016

Subject: Regionalisation of Adoption



Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

The purpose of this report is to provide information about the adoption reform proposals contained within the Education and Adoption Act 2016. The government is clear that all local authorities will be part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) or will have delegated their adoption functions to a RAA by 2020.

Leeds has been working in collaboration with other Local Authorities and Voluntary adoption agencies (VAA's) throughout the Yorkshire and Humber region to create a new model of service delivery for adoption services in line with the government's agenda.

This report sets out the plan to develop a hub and spoke model of delivering adoption services in the region. The intention is that the regional hub will fulfil some functions and there will be three spokes: West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and North and Humber spokes who will deliver adopter recruitment, assessment and adoption support at a local level. The plan is that the five West Yorkshire Local Authorities will come together to form a West Yorkshire RAA, hosted by Leeds City Council. This report provides the up to date position on the plans for Leeds to transition to the new arrangements.

Recommendations

To ask the Executive Board to support and endorse the proposals towards progressing of the arrangements to establish a Regional Adoption Agency and the creation of a West Yorkshire Adoption Agency.

To agree the proposition that Leeds City Council becomes the host authority for the agency.

To agree this subject to the satisfactory resolution of the following:

- The appointment of a joint committee with appropriate membership, terms of reference and rules of procedure;
- The appointment of a management board including the West Yorkshire local authorities and third sector organisations through a partnership agreement;
- Proposed delegation of functions from the Joint Committee to the lead officer within the West Yorkshire Adoption Agency with regard to the recruitment and assessment of adopters, adoption panels, family finding and adoption support;
- The transfer of staff from other Local Authorities into Leeds City Council;
- The establishment of a budget for the new agency and a funding formula to reflect each Local Authorities contribution to the regional agency budget;
- Establish the commissioning needs of the new agency and the ICT requirements;
- The creation of an organisational unit within Leeds City Council for the new West Yorkshire Adoption Agency. The lead officer for this will be the Director of Children's services and the unit will sit within Children's Services.
- To agree that the Director of Children's Services will continue to work with each of the participating authorities to progress these matters.

1 Purpose of this report

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Leeds has been working in collaboration with other Local Authorities and Voluntary adoption agencies (VAA's) throughout the Yorkshire and Humber region to create a new model of service delivery for adoption services in line with the government's agenda. This report provides the up to date position on the plans for Leeds to transition to the new arrangements.

2 Background information

Nationally

- 2.1 In 2015 the government published "Regionalising Adoption", a White Paper with the stated intention of improving the provision of adoption services through the establishment of regional adoption agencies.

The key aims of this are:

- To place more children in a more timely way
- To recruit more of the right families for the children waiting, preparing them consistently and well.
- To improve the range, accessibility and quality of adoption support

- 2.2 The issues that the government were seeking to address within the adoption reform are as follows:

- 2.3 Inefficiencies:

- The current system is fragmented with around 180 agencies, both Local Authority and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA), recruiting and matching adopters for 5000 children per year. The majority of agencies are operating at a very small scale and this hinders strategic planning and economies of scale.

- 2.4 Timeliness of placing children:

- Whilst there has been significant improvement in the performance of Local Authorities in placing children swiftly with adoptive families there is further progress that can be made. This is particularly the case with harder to place children, often older, within a sibling group or with a disability.

2.5 Adopter recruitment:

- There has been improvement in both the number of adopters recruited and the timescales to achieve this. However, whilst the number of approved adopters nationally is now greater than the number of children waiting, many of these adopters are less willing to consider those children who are harder to place.

2.6 Adoption support:

- The help that is offered to families after adoption is the responsibility of Local Authorities. However, it is currently fragmented and characterised by a combination of in-house and spot purchased arrangements with often significant variations between local authority areas

Yorkshire and Humber Region

2.7 In view of the White Paper the Yorkshire and Humber region, with a strong history of working together as part of the Yorkshire and Humberside Adoption Consortium, submitted an expression of interest to the Department of Education (DfE) to be one of the pioneer projects in August 2015.

2.8 This resulted in DfE funded project work throughout Yorkshire and Humber to look at developing a hub and spoke model of delivering adoption services in the region. The plan put forward and supported by the DfE is that there will be three Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA's):- South Yorkshire, North and Humber and West Yorkshire as spokes who deliver adopter recruitment, assessment, family finding and adoption support at a local level. These spokes are connected by a Hub who will fulfil some functions on behalf of all the three Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA's) across the Yorkshire and Humber region. The work that the hub will do on behalf of the three RAA's is still work in progress but aims to add value and improve outcomes for children as well as providing value for money.

2.9 *West Yorkshire*

2.10 In West Yorkshire, Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield, Calderdale and Kirklees local authorities and the VAA's have been working closely together to develop the West Yorkshire RAA as well as looking at the wider collaboration across the Yorkshire and Humber Region.

2.11 An options appraisal has been undertaken in West Yorkshire to determine the best model of delivery. It is envisaged that the new regional adoption agency will be hosted by a local authority, with a localised presence while maintaining a local service in Children's Services offices across the across West Yorkshire area. There is a clear indication that local authorities support Leeds being the host of the West Yorkshire Adoption Agency.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 The Education and Adoption Act 2016 is clear about the regionalisation agenda and government is clear that all local authorities will be part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) or will have delegated their adoption functions to a RAA by 2020.
- 3.2 The Yorkshire and Humberside consortium have been successful in becoming an early adopter of the regionalisation agenda and have secured financial support to assist with the transition to the new hub and spoke model across the region. This project is one of a small group of projects across the country that has been identified to have the most potential to demonstrate what a RAA could look like and is a demonstration project, which will share any learning and professional advice received on issues that may be common to other projects across the country.
- 3.3 The five local authorities in West Yorkshire have come together and are shaping the new model of delivery across the West Yorkshire area in collaboration with the VAA's and adoptive parents. There is a clear transitional plan in place and the RAA will provide a centre of excellence for adoption practice. The plan is that the RAA will become operational by April 2017 providing a high quality service for children and adoptive families.
- 3.4 This is a good opportunity to improve the current adoption system in relation to streamlining the recruitment and assessment of adopters; to improve the timely matching of children and adopters and the provision of adoption support services across the region.
- 3.5 The adoption functions to be delegated to the West Yorkshire RAA¹ include adopter recruitment and assessment, adoption panels, family finding and adoption support. Each Local Authority will still retain the responsibility for decisions about the planning for children and the match with a family. In Leeds, this will remain the responsibility of the Chief Officer, Children's Social Work Service. There is further scope to look at support for Special Guardians and other permanence and kinship arrangements to be considered as part of the RAA as the project develops.
- 3.6 There are opportunities for further funding across the RAA's with the DFE putting £16 million into looking at innovation and redesigning practice in this area and to improve the skills of the workforce to support permanence decisions and provide high quality adoption support.
- 3.7 The new arrangements will be overseen by a Joint Committee of councillors representing the 5 local authorities, who have knowledge of and responsibility for Children's Services. It is proposed that this will meet as a minimum of one meeting per year with others to be arranged at the chair's discretion. This will enable flexibility in terms of number of meetings if Members feel more control is necessary in the early days but are happy to

¹ Firstly by each of the Local Authorities to the proposed Joint Committee, and then by the Joint Committee to the lead officer within the organisational unit.

exercise a lighter touch as the RAA becomes established. The Director will appoint a Head of Service for the RAA and the Joint committee will receive the reports of performance and progress from the Head of Service and the Chair of the Management Board.

- 3.8 The management and performance management oversight of the RAA will be undertaken by a management board comprising local authorities' Directors of Children's Services or their delegates with co-opted representation on board from the voluntary adoption alliance. They will be supported by 4 nominated representatives from the voluntary adoption alliance (Y&H) the adopters' forum and the adoptees forum. The management board will meet 2 monthly to review both RAA functioning and also the impact for West Yorkshire's children, adopters and birth families.
- 3.9 The strategic direction of the RAA will be discussed and agreed by the Joint Committee following the advice of the Management Board. The Joint committee will provide support and challenge to the management board in exercising their corporate parenting role, regarding the functions delegated to the RAA. The strategy will set stretch targets with key performance indicators. The RAA will be required both to maintain the good performance in WY to date but also to evidence the added value that the RAA has brought to the outcomes for children, their adoptive families and the support for adoption in addition to evidencing value for money.

Options considered

Adoption Agency

- 3.10 The first option is to maintain the status quo position and continuing with our present arrangements as an Adoption Agency. This has been ruled out as it does not meet the need to reduce the number of adoption agencies that the government requires. If Leeds does not implement this proposal it would be out of step with the Yorkshire and Humber Local Authorities and will miss the opportunity of the central Government development funding to develop an alternative model.
- 3.11 The second option is to create a regional adoption service. This would make better use of resources to find adopters and match children to families quickly. If the Council does not implement this in a collegiate way with regional authorities it is likely to be forced by Central government to do so with less control over the process, arrangements and service delivery.

Delivery Model

- 3.12 In considering a preferred delivery model the West Yorkshire project board undertook an options appraisal and considered four options:-
- A regional adoption agency named accordingly, led by a host West Yorkshire local authority;
 - A regional adoption agency, led by a local authority trading company;
 - A new regional voluntary adoption agency established by partnership arrangements; and

- A regional adoption agency led by an existing voluntary adoption agency within the West Yorkshire region undertaking the role in the areas of the 5 LA's.

3.13 The outcome of the appraisal was that partners support the integration of the 5 Local Authority adoption agencies into a single regional agency led by a host local authority. All local authorities and the VA alliance indicated the choice for Leeds City Council to host the agency.

4 Leeds Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 There has been regional consultation with lead members for children across the region to keep them updated about progress and this has also taken place locally. Steps have also been taken to ensure that new elected members have been briefed and there will be more detailed and ongoing consultation as the project develops.
- 4.1.2 There have been regular discussions with staff in Leeds to keep them up to date on the progress of regionalisation. The trade unions have also been kept up to date on the progress of the plans to date.
- 4.1.3 The transfer of the adoption function to the regional agency and staff from other Local Authorities to Leeds will require detailed HR processes to address TUPE, assimilation, due diligence etc. as well as formal consultation with the staff and trade unions in the coming months.
- 4.1.3 Engagement of adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth families has being underway regarding this agenda, with adoptive parents on the project board to ensure that the service is developed to meet the needs of adoptive families as the RAA is being developed.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

- 4.2.1 An equality impact assessment will be completed as part of the consultation process.

4.3 Council policies and Best Council Plan

- 4.3.1 The adoption service contributes to the Best Council Plan outcome for everyone in Leeds to 'be safe and feel safe' with specific priorities for 2016-17 to 'keep people safe from harm' and 'support children to have the best start in life'. In addition, the supporting Children and Young People's Plan identifies Looked after Children as one of three priority 'obsessions'. The adoption service is integral to our plan to safely and appropriately reduce the numbers of Children Looked After through ensuring all our children are placed in a permanent family outside the care system as soon as possible and developments to improve adoption services address this priority.

4.4 Resources and value for money

4.4.1 Work is ongoing to determine a regional adoption budget with an agreed funding formula from each of the Local Authorities. In addition work is also ongoing looking at assessing financial risk within the partnership and risks & rewards will be looked at. At this stage it is not envisaged that there will be additional financial costs to the authority.

4.4.2 It is envisaged that significant practice improvement for children and adopters will be achieved, as well as the scope for economies of scale and cost efficiencies, through the establishment of a regional agency over time.

4.4.3 The adoption staff will be working in a number of locations across the West Yorkshire area. The main office base will be within Leeds

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

4.5.1 The new arrangements will be underpinned by a detailed Partnership Agreement, determining a regional adoption budget with an agreed funding formula from each of the LA's.

4.5.2 The Education and Adoption Act 2016 makes provision to have joint arrangements to carry out local authority adoption functions in England.

4.5.3 The Secretary of State has the power to direct one or more local authorities to make arrangements for any or all of their specified adoption functions to be carried out on their behalf by one of the local authorities named or by another adoption agency. The Secretary of State can either name which adoption agency should carry out these functions, or instruct the local authorities to determine who should carry out the functions.

4.5.4 This means the Government has the power to remove the adoption function from a local authority it considers failing within its adoption duties and to pass these responsibilities to another agency.

4.3.5 This report is subject to Call In.

4.6 Risk Management

4.6.1 As the host local authority Leeds needs to ensure that the risks in taking this on are minimised through clear partnership agreements and robust governance and accountability arrangements to be put into place.

4.6.2 There is a host working group, chaired by the Chief Officer in Children's services ensuring that the full responsibilities of hosting the agency are met and any risks minimised.

4.6.3 If Leeds does not implement this proposal this does not meet the governments expectation to reduce the number of adoption agencies and Leeds would be out of step with the Yorkshire and Humber Local Authorities

and would also miss the opportunity of government funding to implement the agency.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Leeds has been working in collaboration with other Local Authorities and Voluntary adoption agencies (VAA's) throughout the Yorkshire and Humber region to create a new model of service delivery for adoption services in line with the government's agenda. There is an agreed approach to the future delivery of services on a regional and sub-regional level. This will improve services for children and adoptive families and deliver a more effective and cost efficient service, utilising government funding to manage the transition and improve the practice in this important area of work.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 To ask the Executive Board to support and endorse the proposals towards progressing of the arrangements to establish a Regional Adoption Agency and the creation of a West Yorkshire Adoption Agency.
- 6.2 To agree the proposition that Leeds City Council becomes the host authority for the agency.
- 6.3 To agree this subject to the satisfactory resolution of the following:
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- To agree that the Director of Children's Services will continue to work with the participating authorities in order to progress these matters.

7 Background documents²

7.1 None

² The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.