

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ADULT CARE AND HEALTH SERVICES

TO:	ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE		
DATE:	3 OCTOBER 2016	AGENDA ITEM:	8
TITLE:	ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ADOPT THAMES VALLEY REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY PROJECT		
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of plans to set up a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) across the Thames Valley Region. It sets out the legislative framework, potential benefits for children and families and describes the planned timetable for setting up the RAA. The purpose of the report is to secure in principle support for Reading joining the RAA, a further report setting out the detailed financial implications will be presented prior to a final decision being taken.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Committee agree 'in principle' to joining Adopt Thames Valley.
- 2.2 Request a further paper with more detail in relation to the financial implications of the project prior to a final decision being taken.
- 2.3 Agreement that officers should work with partners in Adoption Thames Valley to develop a service that is affordable and meets the needs of Reading residents (including the sharing of relevant information)

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 In June 2015 the Government published a paper titled Regionalising Adoption, it set out provision for the creation of Regional Adoption Agencies. A RAA is a service delivering adoption services across multiple local authority areas, services specifically referred to are the recruiting, matching and supporting of adopters. The RAA will also include voluntary adoption agencies as partners. There is no definitive expectation on the type of organisation that will deliver the RAA functions, but original guidance has referred to four potential models, they are:

- Local authority shared service
- Local authority owned company
- Joint venture between local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies
- Commissioned service (out sourced to a VAA)

(Most RAAs across the country are opting for a local authority based shared service and this is the option also preferred by Adopt Thames Valley).

- 3.2 The Government have stated that they expect every local authority to be part of an RAA or to have delegated their adoption functions to one by 2020. They have also said that they will use the powers of the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to require authorities to do this from 2017 if insufficient progress is being made towards this aim.
- 3.3 There are many good reasons for joining an RAA beyond the threat of compulsion that has been set out by government. It also seems likely that local authorities who are involved in the setting up and design of RAAs will potentially have more influence and control over the destiny of their adoption services than those who choose to leave it until later.
- 3.4 Reading Borough Council Children's Services were subject to an Ofsted inspection in May-June 2016. This judged the adoption service to be 'Requiring Improvement'. The Ofsted report presents a mixed picture and is critical of some aspects (e.g. speed of adoption process and sufficiency of suitable placements), but praises improvements in the number of children placed for adoption (including some harder to place children).

4. THE PROPOSAL

4.1 Current Position:

- 4.2 Reading provides adoption services as part of Children's Services. The team is comprised of a team manager, an assistant team manager and 7.3 FTE social workers. The team is supported by 1.2 FTE business support staff. The team recruit potential adopters, identify placements for children who are unable to live safely with their birth families and provide support to adopters. In 2015/16 Reading recruited 14 adopters and placed 25 children for adoption.

4.3 Options Proposed

- 4.4 The proposal is to seek in principle agreement to joining Adopt Thames Valley (ATV). Work is underway to develop ATV as a partnership between seven local authorities (Bracknell Forest, Oxfordshire, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham, Swindon and potentially Reading) along with two Voluntary Adoption Agencies (PACT and Barnardos). The local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies are working to develop a new shared service that will provide adoption services across the geographical area of the participating local authorities.
- 4.5 There are many potential benefits in developing shared adoption services with other local authorities and voluntary agencies. Adoptive placements are rarely made for Reading children with Reading adopters, as this is seldom in the best interests of the child or adopter. In most cases children are matched with adopters out of the immediate local area. When this happens a fee is paid to the authority or voluntary agency that approved the adopters (the fee is typically £27K per child). By working together and pooling resources the authorities and voluntary agencies will potentially provide more placement options and also better value.
- 4.6 Adopt Thames Valley is being developed with the support of the Department for Education. They have granted funding to assist the partner organisations to work

together to develop a new service that delivers both better outcomes for children and adopters whilst also reducing costs for the local authorities participating.

- 4.7 Adopt Thames Valley is building on work that was carried out by four of the participating local authorities (Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham). In 2014 they set up Adopt Berkshire, a shared service hosted by Windsor and Maidenhead. This has been successful in promoting positive outcomes for children, external validation (Wokingham received a good judgement for adoption from Ofsted in 2015) and has delivered savings. Adopt Berkshire is a good demonstration that the concept of shared and joined up adoption services works. The new RAA is not an extension of Adopt Berkshire, but an entirely new RAA built on the principles and learning from the original shared service.
- 4.8 The proposal is to develop a shared service across the geographic area of all of the constituent local authorities. The new service would take responsibility for all recruitment, matching of children and support for adopters. The service will have a governance structure that ensures all partners have equal influence on the operation of the new service.
- 4.9 The service specification, team structure and funding mechanism for the new service are being developed at present. When this work has been completed a further paper will be provided setting out the financial implications, quality assurance processes and performance measure framework for the new service. It will also describe the precise terms of engagement (e.g. length of commitment, notice period required etc).
- 4.10 In summary the key anticipated benefits of the Adopt Thames Valley Model are:
- improved outcomes for children through the availability of a larger pool of adopters
 - improved ability to place harder to place children for adoption (e.g. older children, children with disabilities, sibling groups and BME children)
 - improved experience for adopters through quicker matches with children who need placements
 - better value for local authorities through economies of scale in the recruitment and assessment process for adopters
 - potential savings for local authorities through placing children with adopters more quickly (i.e. saving foster care costs).
 - improved adoption support services across a wider geographical area
- 4.11 **Planned Time Line for the Setting Up of Adopt Thames Valley**
- 4.12 Work started on the project in December 2015, over the duration of the project there have been some significant changes. We now have a group of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies that are committed to the project. The Department for Education has committed to funding the project through to its conclusion and, along with all other projects, Adopt Thames Valley is waiting to hear the level of funding available through to Autumn 2017 when it is envisaged that the new service will become operational. There is no expectation of contributions from partner local authorities to the cost of the project, with the exception of some officer time to attend meetings and workshops. Some of the key activities and event in the planned time line are set out below:
- October 2016 Service specification, design and financial arrangements for the new service finalised
 - November 2016 Completion of due diligence and selection process to identify which local authority will host the Adopt Thames Valley
 - November 2016 to January 2017 - Local Authority Partners to secure political commitment to joining the new service

- Spring 2017 Formal consultation with staff affected by the setting up of the new service
- Spring 2017 - Logistical arrangements for new service finalised
- Early Summer 2017 Staffing arrangements for Adopt Thames Valley Finalised
- September 2017 Adopt Thames Valley becomes operational

4.13 Potential Risks of Joining Adopt Thames Valley

4.14 One of the key risks associated with joining an RAA is the potential loss of influence in the governance and oversight of adoption activity. At present the council has full control over adoption activity in the same way that it does for all other aspects of the corporate parenting responsibility for looked after children and young people. Joining an RAA will involve collaborating with others in the discharge of these important duties. This could be viewed as potentially loss of control, however councils joining Adopt Thames Valley will do so as equal partners and will be assured a full and active role in the governance of the new service. This potential change is a key element of the new adoption legislation and all authorities will be compelled to join an RAA at some point between now and 2020. Joining Adopt Thames Valley will enable authorities to design and shape the new service, rather than potentially being required to join an existing RAA.

4.15 The second area of risk relates to finance. The council is facing unprecedented financial challenges at present. Committing to joining a shared service could be viewed as problematic when work is underway to deliver significant savings. All of the local authority partners are clear that the new service will only be sustainable if it is able to deliver services to a high quality with a reduction in costs. The services provided by Adopt Thames Valley will be largely statutory and will have to continue to be delivered. Consequently the most important consideration will be that they can be delivered in the most efficient and effective way and it is clear that the economies of scale offered by Adopt Thames Valley offer real potential for achieving this more successfully than could be done by any authority working alone. The main influence over the cost of the new service will be the level of activity (i.e. the number of children needing adoption and the number of adopters recruited). The number of children being adopted will continue to be driven by children's services and outside the influence of Adopt Thames Valley, whereas there is confidence that Adopt Thames Valley will contribute to increasing the pool of adopters available potentially impacting positively on the overall costs of adoption services.

4.16 Because Adopt Thames Valley is being established as a shared service local authority partners will be able to manage the risks associated. Firstly they will be able to shape and influence the service through their participation in the governance arrangements. If this is unsuccessful they will ultimately be able to give notice and leave Adopt Thames Valley. Some of the models proposed by other RAA's would make this a far more complex option.

4.17 Other Options Considered

4.18 No Change

4.19 The Government has stated said on a number of occasions that it expects all local authorities to be part of a RAA by the year 2020. This aspiration was first set out in 'Regionalising Adoption' (June 2015). It was reiterated by Edward Timspon in a speech in February 2016 and also referenced in 'Adoption - Agenda for Change' (March 2016). The government has also enacted legislation enabling them to intervene to determine how individual local authorities provide adoption services. In light of these statements and actions it would seem unlikely that maintaining the current situation would be viable in the longer term.

4.20 Join an Alternative Regional Adoption Agency

4.21 Adopt Thames Valley is one of fourteen RAA projects that are being set up nationally. The option exists to approach other projects with a view to joining them as an alternative. We adjudge ATV to be the best option for Reading at present for two main reasons. Firstly Reading is geographically at the centre of ATV, which is potentially advantageous in terms of identifying suitable placements within reasonable travelling distance. Secondly the shared service model currently being proposed maintains flexibility going forward, some other RAAs are developing organisations and structures that would be more difficult to influence or adapt once set up (e.g. joint mutual ventures or services wholly delivered through commissioned approach)

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 This proposal relates to three of the Council's strategic aims, they are:

- Safeguarding and protecting those that are most vulnerable;
- Providing the best start in life through education, early help and healthy living;
- Remaining financially sustainable to deliver these service priorities.

5.2 Delivery of high quality permanent placements for children who cannot safely live with their birth families is an essential element of an effective safeguarding service. Joining the RAA will enable our children's services to focus on safeguarding activity confident in the knowledge that the RAA will provide permanent placements when needed.

5.3 Research demonstrates that adoption provides an excellent start in life for children who are unable to safely remain in their birth families. The earlier children are placed the better their prospects for a successful, stable placement and good outcomes in later life. The RAA offers the opportunity to help ensure this is in place as quickly as possible.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

6.1 The new service is being developed collaboratively with the active involvement of children, adopters and other key stakeholders. Consultation is taking place through the use of events, surveys and other processes to engage stakeholders. The project team developing the new service also includes representation from a social enterprise company set up by adopters, which is helping to ensure they have a strong influence on design of the new service.

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.1 It is not envisaged that the potential changes proposed will impact upon any protected groups. Access and eligibility for adoption services would not be changed if a decision is taken to join Adopt Thames Valley.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Legal advice will be obtained as required to support this service re-organisation. The Corporate Management Team identified a number of Reading Borough Council leads to support this initiative, including the legal representative.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Further work is required before detailed financial analysis is available. A final recommendation to join Adopt Thames Valley will be contingent upon it offering a lower unit cost for services than our current provision. The actual costs of the service will be contingent upon the demand for the services it provides.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 Regionalising Adoption (June 2015)
Education and Adoption Act (2016)
Adoption - Agenda for Change (March 2016)