

**Decision Session – Executive Member for
Education, Children and Young People**

19 September 2017

Report of the Assistant Director – Childrens Specialist Services

Hosting the North and Humber Regional Adoption Agency

Summary

1. On 9th February 2017, the Executive considered a report outlining proposals for the establishment of a North and Humber Regional Adoption Agency [RAA] comprising the six existing local authority adoptions agencies [North Yorkshire CC, City of York, Hull, East Riding CC, North East Lincs. and North Lincs.] in this region.
2. At this meeting, the Executive agreed ‘in principle’ to the establishment of a North and Humber Regional Adoption Agency to be known as One Adoption North and Humber [OAN&H] as a shared service with City of York as the host local authority.
3. This report provides an update on progress towards the establishment of the North and Humber Regional Adoption Agency, further to the in principle agreement by Executive on 9th February 2017.
4. The North and Humber RAA will be one of three RAAs in the Yorkshire and Humber region, alongside West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire. These RAAs will deliver adopter recruitment; timely linking of children with a suitable adoptive family and adoption support to the child and family.
5. The RAAs will jointly commission some services via a shared regional “hub”.
6. It is important to state that local authorities will retain responsibility for the plan for adoption for a child and for the agreement to a child’s match with an adoptive family.

7. Following the in principle agreement on 9th February, the Assistant Directors of the six local authorities worked on the details of the delivery model for the RAA, drawing on the current success and effectiveness of the partner local authority adoption services (all judged to be good or outstanding by Ofsted) and feedback from adopters regarding the importance of locally delivered services.
8. They concluded that a strength based delivery model would best meet the particular needs of service users in the North and Humber. It is therefore proposed that the North and Humber RAA will retain adoption staff within each local authority and deliver a single adoption service through the creation of a Head of Agency and three Service Managers managing the entirety of the region's adoption service. The Service Managers will each manage a single team covering two localities (consisting of paired local authorities) and report directly to the Head of Agency.
9. The RAA will operate under the terms of a Partnership Agreement, which will confirm the legal and governance arrangements, the budget, staffing and funding contributions. Each local authority will contribute equally to fund the core functions of the RAA, including the Head of Agency with overall responsibility for the performance of the RAA. The first annual contribution will be £40,000 per local authority.
10. Operational accountability will be to the Leadership and Management Board, comprising of senior officers delegated by the Director of Children Services for each local authority, with representation drawn from key stakeholders, including adoptive parents and the voluntary sector.
11. The Head of Agency will report to the Leadership and Management Board and will be line managed by City of York's Assistant Director Children's Specialist Services.

Recommendations

The Executive Member is asked to:

12. Confirm the decision to establish a North and Humber Regional Adoption Agency, to be known as 'One Adoption North and Humber', from the amalgamation of the adoption services of East Riding, North Yorkshire, North East Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, Hull and York councils.

13. Confirm City of York as host local authority.
14. Approve the RAA delivery model as a single service through the creation of a Head of Agency and three Service Managers managing the entirety of the regional adoption service. The Head of Agency will report to the Leadership and Management Board and line manage the Service Managers, who will each manage a single team covering two localities (paired local authorities).
15. Authorise York's Director Children, Education & Communities, in consultation with the Assistant Director of Legal Services, to approve the terms of the detailed partnership agreement.

Reason:

16. The recommendations outline a pro-active response to Government requirements, in a cost effective way that builds on the existing strengths of the partner local authorities.

Background

National Policy Context

17. The Education and Adoption Act 2016 makes provision for joint arrangements to carry out local authority adoption functions in England, with the Secretary of State having 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 a named local authority or by another adoption agency.

The issues that the government sought to address were:

18. Inefficiencies: in that the system was fragmented with around 180 agencies, both local authority and voluntary adoption agencies, 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
19. Timeliness of placing children: whilst there had been significant improvement in the performance of local authorities in placing children swiftly with adoptive families, it was felt that there was further progress

that could be made. This was particularly the case with harder to place children, often older, within a sibling group or with a disability

20. Adopter recruitment: whilst there had been improvement in both the number of adopters recruited and the timescales to achieve this, many of these adopters were less willing to consider those children who are harder to place
21. Adoption support: the help that was offered to families after adoption is the responsibility of local authorities but it was fragmented and characterised by a combination of in-house and spot purchased arrangements, with often significant variations between local authority areas

Yorkshire and Humber Regional Response

22. The Yorkshire and Humber region, with a strong history of working together as the Yorkshire and Humberside Adoption Consortium, in August 2015 submitted an expression of interest to the Department of Education (DfE) to be one of the pioneer projects. This resulted in DfE funding project work throughout Yorkshire and Humber to look at developing a 'hub and spoke' model of delivering adoption services.
23. The plan put forward and supported by the DfE was for three RAAs: South Yorkshire, North and Humber and West Yorkshire, as spokes delivering adopter recruitment, assessment, family finding and adoption support at a local level. These spokes would be connected by a hub that would provide the coordination of a regional matching register, performance reporting, specialist training, practice sharing and regional scale commissioning. The role of the hub would develop in line with the needs of the developing RAAs.
24. The Yorkshire and Humber project was selected as one of five "Demonstration Projects" by the DfE (out of nineteen) projects in England and has received additional funding to develop the project through to the establishment of the three RAAs.

North and Humber sub regional response:

25. The six local authorities in the North and Humber region, East Riding, North Yorkshire, North Lincolnshire, North East Lincolnshire, York and Hull, recognised that working collaboratively provided a significant opportunity to respond to the national agenda. By delivering a single

service whilst maintaining functions at a regional and local level, partners envisaged delivering a faster and more cost efficient process for finding adoptive families for children, whilst achieving some economies of scale. The new service will improve outcomes and ensure better value from commissioning.

26. The RAA will work in partnership with children's social work services in each local authority. The local authority will retain the corporate parenting responsibility for looked after children and each local authority will still retain the responsibility for decisions about the planning for a child and the match with an adoptive family. In York, this will remain the responsibility of the Director of Children's Services; delegated to the Assistant Director, Children's Specialist Services.

Progress to-date:

27. Developing the Delivery Model - A single local authority hosted model for an RAA, with City of York Council as the host, was agreed in principle by Executive/Cabinet for all six local authorities by March 2017.
28. Significant work has progressed to explore with due diligence the legal, human resources, finance, IT and practice opportunities and risks. Through this work it has been possible to identify issues, and solutions, in identifying the most effective RAA arrangements for this region.
29. Early preparation work for the North and Humber RAA has included the alignment of operational policies and processes across the six local authorities. This has been a key strand of the work to date and has helped to bring into much sharper relief the most effective model and governance structures for delivering the intended outcome from this initiative.
30. The impetus has been to share and align best practice, in order to effect a smooth transition into an RAA. This has resulted in a shared 'One Adoption' website and marketing strategy with West and South RAAs and a single contact number for new enquirers, with options to select the caller's "local" adoption service. There are key messages on each local authority's website, with One Adoption branding and links through to the One Adoption website.
31. Operationally there have been regular meetings that consider current data, processes and opportunities to develop an operating model suited

to delivering a single adoption service over the region's very wide geographical area.

32. A focus on adopters' experiences has been integral to the agency's development and an emerging theme has been of adopters being interested in regionalisation but setting a high priority on still wanting to feel they are in touch with a local service; likewise with young people.
33. Similarly, staff feedback, though very positive around the opportunity the RAA offered to continue to improve practice and provide consistent high quality services for children and adoptive families, highlighted concerns regarding potential negative impact for adopters and children where they may lose connections with their local workers and service.
34. Work has continued across all of the thematic work streams to plan for operational transition from six local authorities to a single service RAA, whilst mitigating any potential negative impact on children and adoptive families either during transition and beyond into the fully implemented model.
35. Progress has been reviewed against the objectives set for the RAA both locally and by the DfE [Appendix 1], to ensure that the planned operating model is the best option and has the flexibility to adapt to the changing national picture regarding adoption.
36. A recent Adoption Leadership Board's 'Adopter sufficiency' report highlighting the downturn in the number of adopters being approved, heightened the need to identify a delivery model that incorporated feedback from adopters, young people, staff and other partners whilst remaining fully focused on the immediate need to substantially increase the number of available adopters.
37. The need to preserve strong links with each local authority's children's service was recognised as crucial, as this ensures the systematic and timely consideration of adoption for all children. It also ensures that family finding starts immediately for those children for whom it could be appropriate. These critical transaction points between RAA and local authorities are considered to be best served by an RAA model that sits as close to the local authority children's services departments as possible.
38. It is reasonable to predict that any restructuring of services involving significant transfers of staff is likely to create a temporary but significant

dip in performance (including recruitment) prior to stabilisation of a new operating model. In light of the drivers discussed above, the development of the delivery model for this RAA has sought to minimise any unnecessary staff transfers and instead to maximise and exploit the significant existing strengths in this region.

The Final Model

39. Whilst the RAA model will retain adoption staff within each local authority, it will deliver a single service 'One Adoption North and Humber' through the creation of a Head of Agency and three Service Managers overseeing the entirety of the shared adoption service.
40. In turn, the Service Managers will each manage a single team covering two localities (paired local authorities) and report directly to the Head of Agency [Appendix 2]
41. This model facilitates the consolidation of best practice, with the Head of Agency having overall responsibility for the performance of the RAA, acting with a clear mandate from each local authority as a strong central leader and driver for improvement and change.
42. The Head of Agency will be accountable to the Leadership and Management Board, comprised of the Assistant Directors from the six local authorities, adopters and Voluntary Adoption Agency or Adoption Support Agency representatives and chaired by York's Director Children, Education & Communities.
43. Each local authority will contribute equally to fund the core functions of the RAA which will include the Head of Agency; a Management Information Officer; a Marketing Officer; Business, financial and legal support to the RAA; and joint marketing and recruitment with West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire RAAs. The contribution will be £40000 annually from each local authority.

Consultation

44. The development of these arrangements has been informed by extensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders including, children, young people and their parents and carers, prospective adopters, existing local authority adoption teams, colleagues from the private and voluntary sector and senior officers in the Department for Education (through an allocated coach).

Council Plan

45. The adoption service contributes to the Council Plan 2015-19 “A focus on frontline services” and the specific aim that “Every child has the opportunity to get the best possible start in life”.
46. In addition, it meets an objectives of the Children and Young People’s Plan 2016-2020 of ensuring that children and young people who are looked are enabled to be: happy and healthy, safe and protected, and supported each step of the way to adult life.
47. The adoption service is integral to the strategy of ensuring all children and young people who are looked after are placed in a safe, permanent family as soon as possible.
48. The RAA will have an emphasis on the local delivery of services and will retain a base in each local authority office, working with the local authority to ensure that children’s needs are prioritised and that there is a sense of urgency in the planning for children regarding permanence. This will also ensure that families are recruited to meet children’s needs and that adoption support can be delivered effectively at a local level.

Implications

Financial

49. It is not envisaged that there will be any ongoing direct additional financial costs to York as the host authority. The administrative, legal and financial costs to support the RAA have been included in the contribution each local authority will make to fund the core services of the RAA.
50. However, the effect of implementing this national policy requirement will, in the first two years of operation see additional local authority operating costs associated with the loss of income previously generated by the onward trading of adopters approved over capacity required for local need.
51. A separate business case to address / mitigate these potential additional costs in the first two years of operation of the RAA will be developed.

Human Resources

52. The regional agency will be led by a Head of Agency, employed by York on behalf of all six local authorities. The Head of Agency was appointed in advance of the formal establishment of the RAA to take a key role in developing the RAA model.
53. The post has been initially funded by the DfE grant, but going forward will be funded from the contributions from the six local authorities.
54. Whilst the Head of Agency will have a strategic and professional practice leadership role, direct line management and employer responsibilities for the agency staff will remain with the individual constituent local authorities.

Equalities

55. An equality impact assessment will be completed within the first six months of the new agency being fully operational.

Legal

56. A Partnership Agreement is being developed in conjunction with each of the six local authorities' legal advisors. This will include a service specification, detailing services to be provided, and how these are to be funded by the partners, as well as the arrangements for operational oversight.
57. Under the Local Government Act 2000 that allows delegation of executive functions, the five other local authorities will delegate responsibility for approval of adopters to York's adoption agency, where this will be delegated to the Head of Agency.

Crime and Disorder

58. There are no Crime and Disorder implications.

Information Technology

59. The DfE has provided initial grant funding to support the development and implementation of a Management Information and performance reporting system designed to meet the needs of the RAA.

Property

60. The Head of Agency and some central staff will be located in West Offices; the number is likely to be similar to that of York's current adoption staff located in West Offices. The majority of RAA staff will be located in the offices of the other five local authorities.

Risk Management

The main risks and benefits are outlined below:

Reputational

61. Benefits: Enhancement of York's reputation as leader and innovator in the field of social care provision.
62. Risks: that the RAA does not perform to expectations. In these circumstances the host may attract criticism. In mitigation there will be a robust business and performance tracking system established, with regular reporting by the Head of Agency to York's Assistant Director Children's Specialist Services. This will ensure that any emerging issues can be proactively managed.
63. The Corporate Director of Children, Education and Communities will report to CMT on a quarterly basis regarding the performance of the RAA.

Financial

64. Benefits: Hosting the RAA could build business local capacity and reputation for York as a provider of choice for the leadership of other shared service arrangements in the region.
65. Risks: Though the delivery model does not include shared budgets, there is a commitment to jointly finance some posts and functions identified as 'core' to the RAA. This shared financial responsibility will be articulated in the Partnership Agreement, which will clarify shared liability for staff employed by York on behalf of the RAA and that any contracts procured on behalf of the partner local authorities will be their responsibility if the contracts were to outlive the RAA.

Operational

66. Benefits: The benefits of this delivery model are that it builds and improves on existing relationships for co-working and co-production between the local authorities so that best practice can be extended across all.
67. It maintains local links, which adopters and staff highlighted as key for the RAA, whilst also retaining the key close connection between adoption workers and children's teams. The operational model minimises disruption to service delivery and retains focus on recruitment of sufficient adopters, family finding for children and providing adoption support. It is a flexible model that allows response to changes in market and regulations to be managed more quickly without having to lose or recruit staff as demand changes. It is a good basis for further integration if proven of value.
68. Risks: As the delivery model is based on paired local authorities combining services, there is could be a risk to the overall coherence of a regional agency if paired local authorities were to begin to operate as 'silos' rather than taking a 'whole agency' view. This can be mitigated by the Head of Agency and Leadership and Management Board clearly articulating a regional view and closely monitoring operational practice across the RAA to ensure consistency with this.

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Wards Affected: List wards or tick box to indicate all **All** tick

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Annexes

Appendix 1 - Evaluation of delivery model against DfE requirements of an RAA

Appendix 2 - North and Humber RAA model