

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report

Committee/Panel:	Children & Families Advisory Panel
Date:	16 October 2018
Title:	Regional Adoption Agency
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1. Recommendation

That the Children & Families Advisory Panel notes the work being undertaken to create the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt South, as required in legislation.

2. Summary

- 2.1 In June 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) published 'Regionalising Adoption' and required all adoption agencies in England to consider how to work closely together on a regional basis. This was enacted as the Education and Adoption Act 2016, which required authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to join together to form Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs).
- 2.2 The Government's view is that structural change will improve the process for children and adopters leading to increased numbers of children being adopted, a better quality experience for adopters and improved timeliness overall. The DfE expects the RAA programme to deliver consistently good and innovative adoption practice that ensures improved life chances for children.
- 2.3 The purpose of this paper is to share the approved model of delivery of regionalised adoption services across Hampshire County Council, the Isle of Wight Council, Portsmouth City Council and Southampton City Council. The RAA, to be known as Adopt South, was approved by the Executive Lead Member for Children's Services for Hampshire County Council on 12 July 2018 and will be live from 1 April 2019.

3. Contextual information

- 3.1 In late 2015, the authorities in the Adopt South grouping were awarded DfE funding to undertake work to establish a model for regional adoption in the area, with an expectation that this would be fully embedded by no later than 2020.
- 3.2 The authorities have engaged actively since 2016 to develop a model that fulfils the criteria put in place by the DfE; that does not represent an unacceptable risk to any of the authorities involved; retains flexibility to enable authorities to respond to future policy; and, most importantly, is considered to provide genuine opportunities for improving the outcomes for children and families.
- 3.3 A model is now in place that sets out a clear operating model, service offer, structural model and financial framework. These are outlined in this report.
- 3.4 Adoption in Hampshire County Council is rated an 'Outstanding' service by Ofsted and the model proposed will not have an adverse effect on this. The model seeks to build on the current good practice within each authority to deliver a more cohesive, efficient and effective service for some of our most vulnerable children and their families. The service will be delivered at no extra cost to the taxpayer. The new RAA, to be known as Adopt South, will continue to work with its existing voluntary adoption agency partners and other key stakeholders to help shape the new service.

Recommended operating model

- 3.5 The principles underpinning the design of a Regional Adoption Agency in Hampshire have been that there should be consistency of the offer across the county; and that the overall offer should not lead to the offer in any one area of the county being reduced. This was felt to be particularly important in respect of the adoption support offer.
- 3.6 The recommended operating model for Adopt South will deliver the following main services across the Adopt South region:
- Recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters;
 - Matching of children in need of adoptive families;
 - Post- adoption support.

The proposed Adoption Support offer and delivery mechanisms across the RAA have been informed by detailed work by a group of senior adoption professionals across the Adopt South grouping. In the future, the model may be expanded to cover other adoption services.

- 3.7 In order to deliver the operating model and service offer, a revised structural model across the local authorities will be necessary, along with clear operating protocols.
- 3.8 Some of the above functions will be solely delivered by Adopt South on behalf of the region. These can be seen in Appendix 1 with the areas in green delivered by a centralised team for the RAA. However, many of the functions will require joint working and/or collaboration with local authority functions; these are shown in the areas in blue delivered by each local authority area on behalf of the RAA.
- 3.9 It is clear that one of the critical factors on which Adopt South's performance will depend is the strength of joint working and communication with colleagues within each local authority. Significant work has already been undertaken within the senior management team and will be progressed with middle managers and frontline workers during the next 6 months to build relationships, shape the vision and embed a positive culture within the RAA.
- 3.10 One significant remaining area of responsibility considered by the Governance Board was the delegation (or not) of corporate parenting responsibilities (and associated functions) for children with a plan for adoption from local authorities to Adopt South. It was concluded that the statutory responsibility for corporate parenting functions for children with a plan for adoption should remain with each local authority throughout the adoption process. This means that local authorities will retain Agency Decision Maker (ADM) responsibility for children (plans and matching).
- 3.11 Achieving the new structure as set out in Appendix 1 will be effected firstly by way of a partnership agreement under section 113 of the Local Government Act 1972 by which local authorities may place staff at the disposal of other local authorities in order to achieve their statutory functions.
- 3.12 The Head of the RAA role has been advertised and it is hoped that an appointment will be made in October 2018 following a robust interview process. That person will be employed by HCC, the role being funded by the partnership under the Agreement within existing budgets. This is a pivotal role to take the RAA forwards.
- 3.13 A further partner to the process is the voluntary sector, through Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs). The DfE has stated its expectation that all RAAs will include VAAs in planning and development processes, and that VAAs will be involved in the delivery of some adoption services on behalf of RAAs.
- 3.14 Adopt South is committed to working closely with Voluntary Adoption Agencies, and have partnered with PACT and Barnardo's to achieve this. Adoption UK has the status of an Adoption Support Agency (ASA) but has also been advising the group as the RAA develops.

3.15 The vision and intended outcomes agreed by Adopt South include a commitment to maintaining a focus on meeting the needs of each child with a plan for adoption, via use of *the most appropriate services*. During all recent years, each of the four local authorities has commissioned adoption services from the VAA sector, particularly in the areas of adoption placements and adoption support and it is envisaged that this will continue.

4. Finance

4.1 A key DfE criteria for achievement of a RAA is a pooled budget, similar to that for other partnership arrangements, notably the former Wessex Youth Offending Team.

4.2 The legal basis for establishing a pooled budget is given in Section 10(6) of the Children Act 2004, as follows:

“(6) A children’s services authority in England and any of their relevant partners may for the purposes of arrangements under this section-

(a) provide staff, goods, services, accommodation or other resources;
(b) establish and maintain a pooled fund.”

4.3 The recommended starting point for the initial partner contributions was the individual authorities’ ‘in scope’ budgets as disaggregated from the 2017/18 figures. No additional funding has been added or is required. These budgets are those which cover the services Adopt South will become responsible for, so marketing, assessment, family finding, matching and adoption support. The contributions from the authorities are summarised as follows:

Net budget/spend	HCC	IWC	PCC	SCC	Total
	‘£000	‘£000	‘£000	‘£000	‘£000
2017/18 Budget	1,381	228	764	1,387	3,760

4.4 The significant contribution for Southampton City Council is representative of the approach taken within the Council up to 2017/18 to solely purchase adopters under inter-agency agreements rather than recruit in house. Therefore, as is demonstrated in the table above, Southampton City Council has to contribute more. On the basis of these contributions, there will be no further recourse to local authorities for funding for adoption services in scope of the RAA. If, for example, Southampton City Council uses more than the funded amount, they will need to fund this separately.

4.5 Partner contributions will be fixed for an initial two years and are subsequently reviewed for year three based on key indicators of activity. This is to provide some level of certainty for the new arrangements as they

are established, but also to ensure that the authorities themselves are insulated from any financial impact as a result of the arrangements.

- 4.6 Hampshire County Council will host and manage the pooled budget arrangements on behalf of the RAA. Transactions between the authorities will be minimised to avoid processing costs.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 In order to achieve the implementation of the new model of working, a number of areas of work are currently being undertaken:

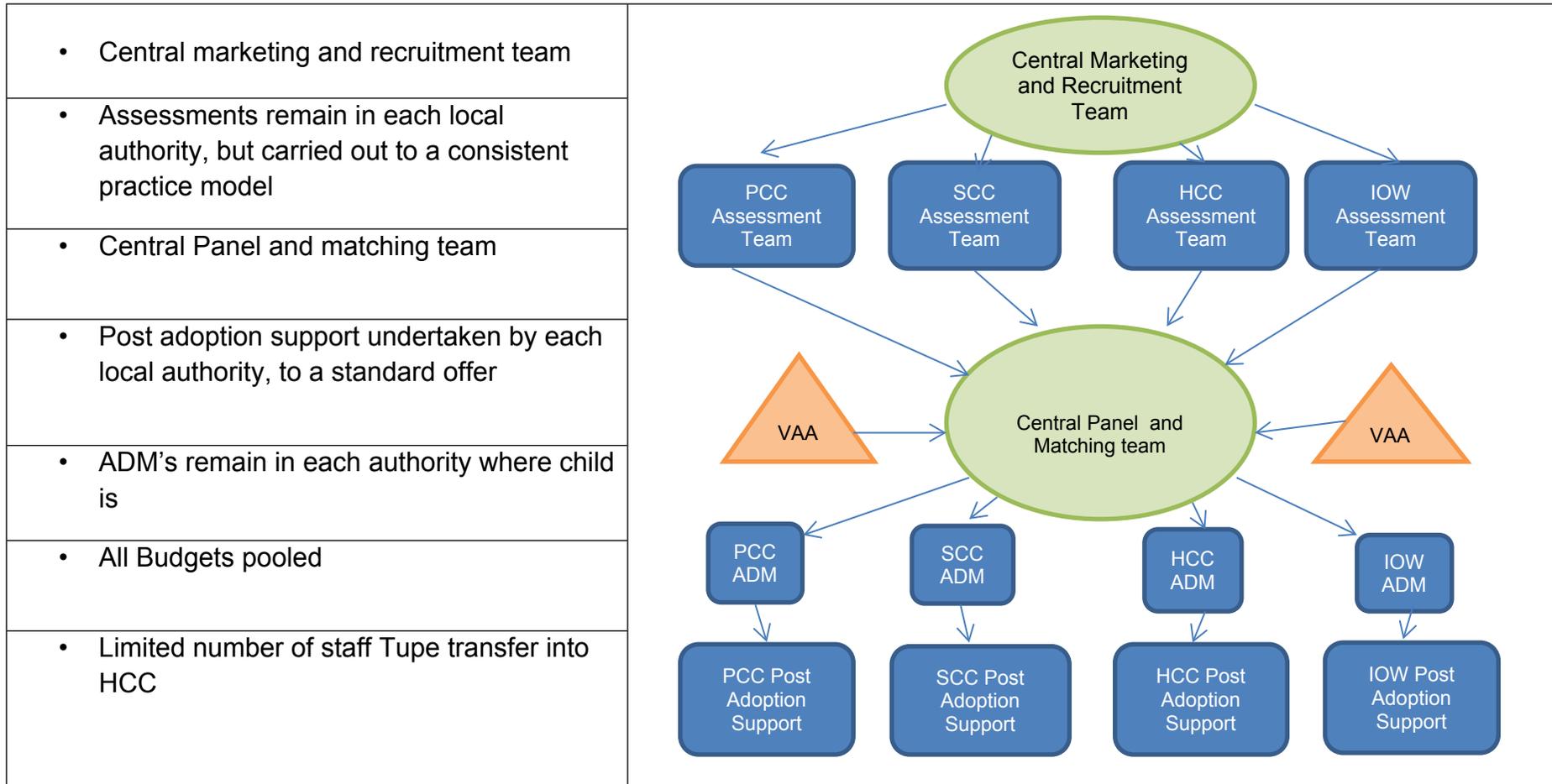
1. HR processes to achieve new structure (including recruitment of Head of RAA)
2. Implementation of the financial model
3. Developing back office
4. Implementation of the branding and marketing strategy
5. Implementation of IT solution
6. Development of the interagency agreements
7. Harmonisation of adoption allowances across the authorities
8. Establishment of regional panels, terminating existing contracts and procuring new arrangements with a suitable competitive process to ensure the VAA's involvement and support in the Adopt South model.
9. Matching arrangements
10. Practice development for assessment
11. Practice development for adoption support
12. Development of the RAA Adoption Manual
13. Commissioning Adoption Support external providers
14. Performance arrangements, including in shadow form to aid transition
15. Accommodation
16. Stakeholder communication (including staff communication and cultural change)

- 5.2 This work is being progressed by the four local authorities working in partnership, and the work will be monitored by the Governance Group. There is a high level of confidence in the ability of the four local authorities to achieve this based on the significant work that has been undertaken to date. The target date for implementation of the new arrangements is 1 April 2019, which is supported by the DfE.

6. Consultation and Equalities

- 6.1 This project will have positive impacts on groups with protected characteristics providing opportunities for children to be adopted from a wider pool of adopters whom have access to a wider range of support services.

Appendix 1 - Recommended Structural Operating Model



CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:

Links to the Strategic Plan

Hampshire maintains strong and sustainable economic growth and prosperity:	yes
People in Hampshire live safe, healthy and independent lives:	yes
People in Hampshire enjoy a rich and diverse environment:	no
People in Hampshire enjoy being part of strong, inclusive communities:	yes

Other Significant Links

Direct links to specific legislation or Government Directives	
<u>Title</u> Adoption and Education Act 2016	<u>Date</u> 2016

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents	
<p>The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)</p>	
<u>Document</u>	<u>Location</u>
None	

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

1. Equality Duty

1.1. The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- a) The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant characteristic connected to that characteristic;
- b) Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- c) Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

1.2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

This project will have positive impacts on groups with protected characteristics providing opportunities for children to be adopted from a wider pool of adopters whom have access to a wider range of support services.

2. Impact on Crime and Disorder:

2.1. None identified

3. Climate Change:

a) How does what is being proposed impact on our carbon footprint / energy consumption?

None identified

- b) How does what is being proposed consider the need to adapt to climate change, and be resilient to its longer term impacts?

None identified