

CABINET

8 FEBRUARY 2022

ADOPTION PARTNERSHIP SOUTH EAST, REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY, ANNUAL REPORT 2021

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mrs Josie Iles – Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services (Lead Member)

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People, Children and Adults Services

Author: Sarah Skinner, Head of Service, Adoption Partnership South East

Summary

In 2015 the Government set out its vision and commitment to deliver a regional adoption system where adoption agencies would come together to deliver adoption services on a larger scale. Medway’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Medway’s Cabinet agreed with plans to develop a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) comprising of the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council and Medway Council in September 2020 and Adoption Partnership South East (APSE) was launched on 1st November 2020.

The first RAA Annual Report attached (Annex A) provides information and an overview of the service, performance set against government targets and service and practice development for the period November 2020 – October 2021.

The report was considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 6 January 2022 and its comments are set out at section 4 of the report.

1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1. This report is consistent with the Council’s budget and Policy Framework including the Council Plan, in particular the Council Plan priority “supporting Medway’s people to realise their potential” and in particular to develop Children’s Services to be a good service.

2. Background

- 2.1. The Statutory Regulations require that Elected Members should be informed of the Adoption Agency's activity on a regular basis. This annual report provides information that will assist Elected Members in respect of their responsibilities as Corporate Parents for Looked After Children.
- 2.2. The report should be read in conjunction with the Adoption Agency's Statement of Purpose, (SOP) which is attached to the main report (Annex A) as appendix 2. The SOP explains our values and principles, the services we provide and the way we provide them. The information provided meets the requirement of National Minimum Standards for Adoption, and the related regulations (Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Misc. Amendments) Regulations 2003).
- 2.3. The agency is committed to fulfilling the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 by:
 - Ensuring the provision of a high-quality adoption service which guarantees the best possible standards of care, safety and protection for children or young people who are looked after and who need adoptive placements.
 - Ensuring that all those whose lives have been affected by adoption are helped to identify and receive appropriate services.
 - Working in partnership with adoptive families & other agencies ensuring the service is based on statutory requirements & good practice within the principles of value for money for the agency.

3. Advice and analysis

- 3.1. The report provides information regarding children's adoption journeys, adopters' journeys and reports the voice of adopted children and adoptive parents.
- 3.2. The report provides information showing that the timeliness for Medway children's adoption care plans has improved.
- 3.3. The report provides information about adopter recruitment and the number of people enquiring about adopting through APSE.
- 3.4. The report provides information regarding adoption support services offered to children and families by the RAA, which have expanded within the last 12 months, with agreement from the Partnership Board to provide a consistent service across the region.

4. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee
 - 4.1. The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the report at its meeting on 6 January 2022 and its comments are set out as follows:
 - 4.2. The Head of Service from the Adoption Partnership South East introduced the Annual report which detailed activities following the launch of the Adoption Partnership in November 2020.
 - 4.3. Members then raised several questions and comments, which included:
 - 4.3.1. **RAA Model** – it was asked what the likelihood was of the Model being a success and what was being done to manage variations in outcomes between the partnership. The officer responded that information from the National research undertaken to date indicated that the RAA Model was proving to be successful. The DfE had provided time limited funding to support a national strategy team, to ensure practice development and consistency across RAA's and around the country.
 - 4.3.2. **Difference in the child level data** – Regarding the three local authorities in this RAA, Kent was the largest and this would attribute to differences in data. At the point of going live, there was a significant number of Medway children who had an adoption plan, who had now been placed over the last 12 months.
 - 4.3.3. Nationally the number of adoption orders had reduced, partly due to delay in court proceedings due to Covid. This had resulted in a significant number of children in adoption placement awaiting adoption orders, who were waiting longer than they would have done previously.
 - 4.3.4. **Recruitment of adopters** – it was asked what was being done to encourage local families to come forward to ensure children could be placed with locally. The officer responded that 96 children had been placed over the last 12 months and all but four had been placed through the RAA. Most enquirers were from regional adopters, although the RAA still attracts potential adopters from neighbouring local authorities. The aim of the recruitment strategy was to recruit adopters based on the needs of the children. There was good representation across the region of prospective adopters.
 - 4.3.5. **Budget** – it was noted that there had been an underspend which had been moved forward to the operational budget for 21/22 and clarification of the underspend was sought. The Committee was informed that there had been several contributing factors to the underspend such as the partnership going live part way through a financial year, inherited vacancies and savings made such as on room hire which could be costly, due to Panel meetings being held virtually. Regular meetings took place with finance leads with reports to the Partnership Board to discuss what to do with the underspend and what proportion could be returned to each LA. Caution was being taken as the partnership went live during the pandemic, there remained some unknowns and there was a balance to be struck going forward.

- 4.3.6. **Court delays** – The Pandemic had resulted in Court backlogs which led to a reduction in Court Orders. As restrictions began to lift, it was anticipated that there may be a surge in demand, and it was asked what mitigation was in place to manage demand. The officer stated that they had been working closely with Child in Care Service Managers and Group Managers in each local authority through monthly tracking meetings and engaging in early conversations with children in care teams to plan where possible.
- 4.3.7. **Resources and Areas of Improvement** – in response to questions on resourcing and areas of improvement identified, the officer said that the initial year was concentrated on becoming one service. There had been a lot of support from the three LA's, with the Partnership Board utilised as a constructive arena for feedback and learning. There had been a lot of work undertaken to ensure that the service was consolidated with staff retained and where necessary recruitment taken place. Meetings would continue to be held with service managers to focus on practice development which would include, training, workshops and one to one support.
- 4.3.8. **Meetings** – in response to a question on return to in person meetings, the officer said that a blended approach was taking place. Reassurance was given that meeting with prospective adopters, introductions between foster carers and adopters and work with children in the adoption process was being undertaken, in a way that met the needs of children and families and in line with regulations.
- 4.4. The Director of People, Children and Adults Services added that the Regional Adoption Agency has been a success to date, Medway had benefitted from the other two LAs in the partnership who held good and outstanding Ofsted ratings. She also confirmed that adoption was highly regulated as all involved had to ensure that the decisions made were in the best interest of the children involved.
- 4.5. The Committee agreed to Note the report.

5. Risk management

- 5.1. Two risks were identified in the Medway Adoption Service Annual Report to Cabinet on 12 January 2021 and there are no changes:

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Finance	The principle underpinning the Adoption Partnership has been that there will be no increase in funding for the first 3 years of the Partnership.	Legal agreement in place	C2
Recruitment of the right adopters for	There is a national shortage of adopters at the current time	Adoption Partnership South East enables all three local authorities to	B2

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
the children of Medway.	which has implications for timely placement of children. This also has implications for the placement of Medway's complex and challenging children.	access a wider pool of adopters and provide good quality support to enable adopters to parent more complex and challenging children.	

6. Climate change implications

- 6.1. Reducing carbon footprint - Several adjustments were needed due to Covid, some of which have been very successful, and will be maintained, whilst others we will not. Staff and parents have embraced the roll out of improved technology, and it has enabled social workers to undertake assessments and provide support to families remotely, despite the pandemic.
- 6.2. It has also enabled people based in different parts of the RAA region, to meet safely. However, home visits to families have returned to in person visits and the teams are physically meeting on at least a monthly basis.
- 6.3. Current practices are reviewed regularly to ensure we can plan strategically to deliver a quality service and respond to changes as and when they are required.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1. A legal Partnership Agreement underpins each Partner's financial contribution to the RAA under a pooled budget arrangement.
 - a) The partnership went live partway through the 2020-21 financial year, with an operating budget of £1,857,049, of which Medway's contribution towards the partnership was £417,866. At the end of the financial year, the service successfully underspent its budget by £222,900 which was rolled forward into the 2021-22 operating budget.
 - b) For the 2021-22 financial year, the partnership has an operating budget of £4,274,100 including last year's roll forward underspend of which Medway's contribution is £928,600 or c20%
- 7.2. Regular monthly meetings are held with Finance Officers from across the three local authority partner agencies, with the Head of Service to ensure there is transparency and accountability.
- 7.3. Quarterly RAA Board meetings are held, as outlined in the annual report, where Directors from each local authority partner review budget expenditure and forecasting.

8. Legal implications

- 8.1. The work of the RAA is governed by:
- Education and Adoption Act 2016
 - Care Planning, placement and Case and fostering services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
 - Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011
 - Care Planning Regulations 2010
 - Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011)
 - Local Authority Regulations 2005
 - Adoption and Children Act 2002
 - Care Standards Act 2000.
- 8.2. The formation of a Regional Adoption Agency meets with government requirements.
- 8.3. The RAA is operated under the terms of a Partnership Agreement, which confirms the legal and governance arrangements; the budget; staffing and funding contributions for the three local authorities.

9. Recommendation

- 9.1. The Cabinet is asked to note the comments from the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out at section 4 of the report.
- 9.2. The Cabinet is asked to note the annual report, as set out at Annex A.

10. Suggested reasons for decision

- 10.1. Statutory guidance requires adoption agencies to report on adoption agency activity in the last year.

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Appendices

Annex A - Adoption Partnership Annual Report 2020 -2021.

Background papers

None.