

CABINET

7 MARCH 2023

ADOPTION PARTNERSHIP SOUTH EAST, REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY, ANNUAL REPORT 2022

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 second 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 2021 – October 2022.

The report was considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 5 January 2023 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 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, (Annexe A, appendix 2) which is attached to the main report. 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 & multi-disciplinary professionals ensuring the service is based on meeting statutory requirements, good practice, and innovation 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 5 January 2023 and its comments are set out as follows:

4.2. Discussion

The Head of Adoption Partnership South East introduced the report which provided information and overview of the service, performance set against government targets and service and practice development for the period November 2021 to October 2022.

4.3. Members then raised a number of comments and questions which included:

4.4. **Future development of the service** – it was asked how likely the service was to be successful and secure funding following the bid submitted for Centre of Excellence. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East informed the Committee that it was envisaged that the bid would be successful, and this would be instrumental in the recruitment of therapists and enable a consistent service to be provided. Currently there were clinicians in place that were solely Kent County Council employees, the success of the bid would allow the opportunity to expand the service through employment of a clinician to serve a wider area of the service.

4.5. **Assessment of new partners** - in response to a question on what the process would be if the relationship of adoptive parents dissolved and one or both of the parents started new relationships, the officer advised the Committee that once an adoption order had been granted, the adoptive parents became the legal guardian of the child. A new partner or stepparent did not acquire automatic parental responsibility of the child unless they embarked on a legal process to formalise responsibility.

4.6. **Virtual Panels** - in response to a question on the likelihood of future panel being held in person, the Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that a survey was conducted, the result of which has led to the continuation of virtual panels. was a higher preference for virtual panels due to increased accessibility. This would however continue to be reviewed on a regular basis.

4.7. **Support for adopters** - a question was asked on how long support was in place for adoptive parents. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that one of the aims of the service was to provide an open door to adoptive parents seeking support. When children were placed, an adoption support plan is agreed. Once an adoption was finalised, some families preferred to get on with family life without support whilst others had ongoing packages in place such as therapeutic support. Families were able to access a range of support services such as training programmes, social work support, therapeutic support and were also signposted to other relevant services for additional support.

- 4.8. **Issues with permanency of adoption** – it was asked what happened in instances where there was adoption breakdown. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that this was uncommon. During 2021/2022 there had been one instance of placement disruption and both child and parents were appropriately supported. If during the adoption process there were serious issues with progression, the child would return to care and the plan may continue to be one of adoption or an alternative care plan may be identified. The child would be supported by their social worker and a family finding social worker if the plan of adoption remains. When looking at difficulties that arise after an adoption order had been granted and potentially sometime after, it is important to remember that parents and children experience family issues in the way that other children, who are not adopted do, in particular during teenage years. Adoptive parents received support such as provision of training on identity and normalisation of adoption to assist them with navigation of some of the more challenging periods.

The Director of People, Adult and Children's Services added that it was important to note that adoption was highly regulated, with any potential issues looked into thoroughly prior to the adoption being finalised and legal responsibility being granted.

- 4.9. **Budget** - in response to a question on why additional funding has been requested when there was an underspend in the previous year's budget. The Director of People, Adults' and Children's Services said that this was a newly established Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), and the yearly budget was still being finalised. A liberal approach was taken with the budget this year which would be rightsized by the next financial year.
- 4.10. **Placement Matching** – it was asked why Medway's figures for placement matching was significantly higher than other Local Authorities. The Head of Adoption Partnership responded that the figures highlighted Medway's performance prior to entering the RAA. The figures were for 2019/20 prior to the RAA where there were placement orders in places but no matches, a lot of work had to be conducted and significant improvement had been made which was reflected in the 2021/22 figures. The high figures illustrated in the report where a child entered care and was placed for adoption reflected the situation during the Covid Pandemic where there were significant delays on the court process, this had also now improved.
- 4.11. **Structure** – it was commented that many Local Authorities were reviewing their model with the possibility of making changes and it was asked if Medway would be doing the same. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that there were currently no plans in place to alter the current model. This was one of the last RAAs to be formed with a preference for a partnership model
- 4.12. **Early Permanence Planning** – it was asked how the services conducted early permanence planning – The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that since November 2020 there had been approximately 60 placements. There was a dedicated early permanence team in place which consists of permanent planning leads who work with children's social workers to identify

children with potential adoption plans at an early stage. They work alongside the local authority social worker. Funding has been secured to support an early permanence workforce and Barnardo's had been commissioned to provide enhanced services to support birth parents.

- 4.13. **Partnership** – in response to a question on maintenance of effective partnership with families, the Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that there was an advisory board in place to monitor and maintain partnership. Monthly bulletins were sent to parents to notify of resources and regular parent meetings were held throughout the year. Barnardo's also provide opportunities for feedback from parents that would be fed back to the RAA.
- 4.14. **Recruitment of potential adopters** – it was asked how the agency reached out to perspective adopters. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that there was information on their website on how a consultation could be requested. Communication strategies such as national and local press releases and radio advertising were used to attract local people who wanted to embark on the process.

It was further asked why there was a lack of mention of placement of children with complex needs in the report. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that the number of children with recognised disability coming through the adoption process was small. Whilst there may be children with complex needs in the system, this may not necessarily have been diagnosed at the point they came through the adoption process but as their needs were recognised, the appropriate support and specialism were sought.

4.15. **Decision**

The Committee noted the report and recommended that future reports include national comparative performance figures.

5. **Head of Adoption Partnership comments**

- 5.1. The Head of the Adoption Partnership South East has made the following comments in relation to the minutes of the discussion at the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:
- 5.2. In relation to the funding bid set out at paragraph 4.4, the Partnership has subsequently been informed that the bid was successful.
- 5.3. In relation to the funding question set out at paragraph 4.9, it is important to note that the RAA did not request increased funding. The agreement regarding financial contributions from each partner local authority is outlined in the legal agreement. The underspend arose due to the transition to the RAA and the development of the service, aligned with the pandemic. There is transparency regarding the budget with actual and forecasted income and expenditure accounted for and reported to the strategic governance board on a quarterly basis.

6. Risk management

6.1. Two risks were identified in the Medway Adoption Service Annual Report to Cabinet on 8 February 2022 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 the children of Medway.	The challenge is to recruit adopters who can meet the needs of Medway's children, who may have complex needs.	All three local authorities have access to a wider pool of adopters for their children, resulting in very few children in APSE needing to be placed with adopters approved by other agencies.	B2

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very high	1 Catastrophic (Showstopper)
B High	2 Critical
C Significant	3 Marginal
D Low	4 Negligible
E Very low	
F Almost impossible	

7. Climate change implications

- 7.1. Reducing carbon footprint - Several adjustments were needed due to Covid, some of which have been very successful, and have been maintained, such as the use of technology.
- 7.2. 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.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1. A legal Partnership Agreement underpins each Partner's financial contribution to the RAA under a pooled budget arrangement.

- 8.2. In the 2021-22 financial the partnership had an operating budget of £4,051,200, of which Medway's contribution towards the partnership was £928,600. At the end of the financial year, the service underspent its budget by £317,687 (Medway's share equalled £63,537) which was rolled forward into the 2022-23 operating budget.
- 8.3. For the 2022-23 financial year, the partnership has an operating budget of £4,152,400 excluding last year's roll forward, of which Medway's contribution is £941,300.
- 8.4. 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.
- 8.5. Quarterly RAA Board meetings are held, as outlined in the annual report, where Directors from each local authority partner review budget expenditure and forecasting.

9. Legal implications

- 9.1. The work of the RAA is governed by:
 - Education and Adoption Act 2016
 - Children and Families Act 2014
 - Adoption: Statutory Guidance 2013
 - Care Planning, placement and Case Review 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
- 9.2. The formation of a Regional Adoption Agency meets with government requirements.
- 9.3. 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.

10. Recommendations

- 10.1. 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.
- 10.2. The Cabinet is asked to note the Annual report 2022, as set out at Annex A.

11. Suggested reasons for decision

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

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

Annex A - Adoption Partnership Annual Report 2022

Background papers

None