

## **Cabinet**

**12 March 2024**

### **Adoption Partnership South East, Regional Adoption Agency - Annual Report 2023**

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive

Author: Amy Coombs, Head of Adoption Partnership South East

#### **Summary**

Adoption Partnership South East is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) providing adoption services for Medway, Kent, and the London Borough Bexley.

The third 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 April 22 – March 23.

The report was considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 11 January 2024 and its comments are set out at section 6 of the report.

#### **1. Recommendations**

1.1 The Cabinet is asked to note the comments from the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out at section 6 of the report.

1.2 The Cabinet is asked to note the Annual Adoption Report.

1.3 The Cabinet is requested to agree to delegate authority to the Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Assistance Director, Legal and Governance, to approve any changes needed to the Partnership Agreement, as set out in paragraph 9.5 of the report.

## 2. Suggested reasons for decision

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

## 3. Budget and policy framework

- 3.1 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.

## 4. Background

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 The report should be read in conjunction with the Adoption Agency's Statement of Purpose (SOP), (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).
- 4.3 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.

## 5. Advice and analysis

- 5.1 The report provides information regarding children's adoption journeys; adopters' journeys and reports the voice of adopted children and adoptive parents.
- 5.2 The report provides information showing that the timeliness for Medway children's adoption care plans continues to improve.

- 5.3 The report provides information about adopter recruitment and the number of people enquiring about adopting through Adoption Partnership South East (APSE).
- 5.4 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.

## 6. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 6.1 The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the report on 12 March 2024 and the minutes of this are set out below:
- 6.2 The Head of Adoption Partnership South East introduced the report to the Committee and provided some highlights since the report was written which included:
- 6.3 Ofsted findings highlighted that since Medway joined the Regional Adoption Agency, there had been improvements on timeliness of identification of suitable adopters for children, prospective adopters were suitably prepared and assessed for their parenting role and the partnership appropriately prioritised the requirements of adopters to meet the needs of children.
- 6.4 Significant improvements had been made and this was through joint working with Medway Children's Services, in particular, collaboration and improvement in permanency planning, robust monitoring and tracking as well as strengthened adoption care planning.
- 6.5 Medway children were being matched in significantly less time than the national average.
- 6.6 There were a high number of adopters approved and available for Medway Children.
- 6.7 Members then raised a number of comments and questions, which included:
- 6.8 The report was commended for being informative, easy to read and exceptionally professionally written.
- 6.9 **Adopter assessments** - in response to a question on length of assessments and responsibility for target setting, the officer said that the timescales were significantly better than the national average. Targets were set by the DfE, stage one was part of a two month assessment process and whilst steps were taken to keep the time scales for this stage of the process down, the agency worked with its partners to ensure that adoption regulations were followed stringently to ensure that all requirements were met before progressing to the next stage of the process. Reduction of timescales were not done at the detriment of safe approvals.

6.10 In response to a question on the number of approved waiting adopters against children waiting to be placed, the officer said that Adoption Partnership South East had 17 approved adopters and 1 Medway child that an adopter was actively being sought for. The challenge with placements was whether local adopters could match the needs of a child/children and if this were not the case, prospective adopters would be sourced nationally.

6.11 **Sibling placement** – it was asked whether any decisions made not to place siblings together were made based on a social workers assessment or due to resource issues. The officer was confident in the decision making process of Medway Social Workers in placement of siblings and that often the decision to keep siblings together may mean that foster care placement may be more appropriate due to their high needs. A project has been embarked on to extend the pool of adopters for sibling groups and support social workers in the decision to keep siblings together where possible. There was an increase in adopters wanting to take on siblings which was encouraging. It was also vital to recognise that some children’s needs were complex, and the high levels of trauma experienced may mean their needs would be best met if separated, despite the difficulty in the decision to separate them. In this instance, many adopters actively ensured maintaining of regular interactions between separated siblings by taking holidays together, meeting up for birthdays.

6.12 It was asked whether there were adopters that chose not to tell children that they were adopted. The officer confirmed that prospective adopters were informed right from the beginning of the expectation of honesty and that children were to be informed that they are adopted. This was non-negotiable as each child would be provided with a life story book and if prospective adopters were not comfortable with this, they did not continue in the process.

6.13 **Decision:**

1. The Committee noted the report.
2. The Committee requested that future reports provide detailed information on sibling placements.

7. Risk management

7.1 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	Legal agreement in place	CII

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	been that there will be no increase in funding for the first 3 years of the Partnership.		
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.	BIII

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely	I Catastrophic
B Likely	II Major
C Unlikely	III Moderate
D Rare	IV Minor

## 8. Climate change implications

- 8.1 Reducing carbon footprint – Staff are supported to work from home and can use different offices across the region to reduce the need to travel.
- 8.2 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.

## 9. Financial implications

- 9.1 The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) operates under a pooled budget arrangement, with each partner's financial contribution outlined in a legal Partnership Agreement.
- 9.2 For the 2022-23 financial year, the partnership had an operating budget of £4,152,500 - of which Medway contributed c23% equating to £941,300 and

reserves of £317,687. As at the 31 March 2023, the RAA underspent its operating budget by £110,817, which the Board agreed to transfer into reserves for use in 2023-24. Medway's share of the 2022-23 underspend equates to £22,163.

- 9.3 At their meeting on 17/03/2023, the Board agreed to release and return the prior year's underspend of £317,687 to partners, of which Medway's share was £63,537.
- 9.4 Quarterly Board meetings are held, as outlined in the annual report, where Directors from each local authority partner review the budget and forecast. Regular meetings are also held with each LA's finance officer to review the budget and forecast to ensure transparency and accountability.
- 9.5 In January 2024, the RAA Board considered proposals to change the financial contributions, as outlined in the partnership agreement, from April 2024. The proposal was included as part of the draft 2024-25 revenue budget and Cabinet is asked to delegate authority to the Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Assistant Director, Legal and Governance to approve any changes to the Partnership Agreement.

## 10. Legal implications

10.1 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

10.2 The formation of a Regional Adoption Agency meets with government requirements.

10.3 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.

### Lead officer contact

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## Appendices

Annex A, Appendices 1-5 Adoption Partnership South East Annual Report 22/23

## Background papers

None