

Cabinet

27 August 2024

Adoption Partnership South East, Regional Adoption Agency, Annual Report 2023/2024

Portfolio Holder: 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 fourth RAA Annual Report attached provides information and an overview of the adoption service activity and practice development for the period April 2023 – March 2024.

The report was previously by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 August 2024, the minutes of which are set out at section 7 of the report.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1. The Cabinet is asked to note the comments made by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in section 7 of the report.
- 1.2. The Cabinet is asked to note the annual report as set out at Appendix 1, which outlines the activity that has taken place across the Adoption Partnership South East between April 2023 – March 2024.

2. Suggested reasons for decision

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

3. Budget and policy framework

- 3.1. Adoption Partnership South East operates under a pulled budget from Medway, Bexley and Kent.

4. Background

- 4.1. The Statutory Regulations require that Elected Members 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 all the appendices, including the Adoption Agency's Statement of Purpose (SOP). 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:
 - 4.3.1. 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.
 - 4.3.2. Ensuring that all those whose lives have been affected by adoption are helped to identify and receive appropriate services.
 - 4.3.3. 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 detailed information about how children's needs are at the centre of all the work which takes place within the adoption service.
- 5.3. The report provides information about adopter recruitment and the number of people enquiring about adopting through APSE.
- 5.4. The report provides information regarding adoption support services offered to children and families by the RAA.

6. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
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
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	CII

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

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

7. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 7.1. The report was considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 August 2024 and its comments are set out below:
- 7.2. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East introduced the annual report which detailed the service activity and practice development for the period April 2023 – March 2024.
- 7.3. Members raised several comments and questions which included:
- 7.4. **Wait times** – it was asked what could be done to further reduce the wait times for prospective adopters and children waiting to be adopted. The officer said that the wait time at stage one of the process was high nationally and this was due to the stringent checks that must be carried out to ensure that safe decisions regarding placement of children were being made. In the last year, in Medway there had been an increase between placement orders, to point of matching. Eighteen children had placement orders granted, out of that there

were two children with extremely complex needs, including life limiting conditions, which meant it took longer for them to be matched.

- 7.5. **Partnership working** – it was asked how effective the partnership working was in light of the fact that Kent was dominant due to its size and scale and how officers ensured that the needs of Medway children continued to be met. The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive said she was pleased with the partnership, it worked very well. At the time Medway had joined the partnership, both local authorities already in the partnership were outstanding. Medway's performance was poor and both authorities were gracious with their time and resources and through the partnership Medway had made significant improvements. This was evident from the last ILACS inspection.
- 7.6. **Wrap around support** – the work being done to support adopters of children with complex needs was commended and it was asked what wrap around support was provided post adoption. The officer said that they continued to raise awareness with partners about the needs of these children, who were the most vulnerable in the community and had met with the Integrated Care Board who had agreed that adoptive children would be a priority in the commissioning processes. It was acknowledged that families struggle post adoption and funding had been received from the Department for Education for a pan regional approach pilot scheme in keeping connected with families. Many parents did not always reach out for support until they reached crisis point and this scheme would enable officers to maintain contact at crucial stages. There was also work being undertaken to develop a strong post adoption community peer support network.
- 7.7. Currently, there were currently 40 peer mentors who buddied up with families and provided support from the beginning of the adoption process right through to placement, They built relationships with families which often continued for many years. There were currently five community groups and officers were exploring how to develop more. A coffee shop morning run by adopters was due to be launched and adoption picnics took place regularly.
- 7.8. **Budget** - it was noted that there was an under spend and it was asked what would happen with the funds. The Finance Business Partner said that there was a rollover of £328,000, of which if returned, £66,000 would be Medway's share. When there was an underspend, the Board would make a decision on whether the amount should be returned to the Local Authority or rolled forward to the following year's budget. It was unknown at this stage whether the underspend would come back to the Local Authority as it had in previous years to due challenges in the system.
- 7.9. **Deregistration** - in response to a question on what was being done to avoid deregistration, the officer said that this was a decision made by adopters that had been approved then decided not to continue for various reasons. Officers did work to identify and provide support where necessary.

7.10. **Decision:**

The Committee noted the annual report as set out at Appendix 1, which outlined the activity that had taken place across the Adoption Partnership South East between April 2023 – March 2024.

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. A legal Partnership Agreement underpins each Partner's financial contribution to the RAA under a pooled budget arrangement.
- 9.2. The 2023-24 partnership operating budget was £4,270,942, of which Medway's contribution equated to £964,542. At the end of the financial year, the service underspent its budget by £328,271 (Medway's share equalled £65,654) which was rolled forward into the 2024-25 operating budget.
- 9.3. For the 2024-25 financial year, the board is changing the funding methodology for the partnership. Each partner's contribution will now be based on its activity data rather than historic budgets. The partnership is working with an indicative operating budget of £4,294,951 excluding last year's roll forward, of which Medway's contribution is £997,889. The 2024-25 operating budget cannot be finalised until all three partners have agreed their 2024-25 salary increases.
- 9.4. Quarterly RAA Board meetings are held, as outlined in the annual report, where Directors from each local authority partner review budget expenditure and forecasting as well as regular meeting with the finance representatives of each local authority.

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

Appendix 1 - Adoption Partnership South East Annual Report 23/24

Background papers

None