Reason for Decision

For Oldham Adoption service to become part of the formally established Adoption NoW Regional Adoption Agency

Executive Summary

In June 2015, the Department for Education issued its publication: Regionalising Adoption. This set out the Government’s aim for “all children with an adoption plan to find a loving, stable home as quickly as possible.” The view expressed was that the national system was not working well enough for children waiting to be adopted, particularly for children that are harder to place.

The Government legislated to provide powers in the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to require local authority adoption services to regionalise where they were not making voluntary plans to do so by 2020.

As a result of discussion between Adoption Leads from a number of agencies, a partnership emerged comprising two Voluntary Agencies and six Council’s. The partnership initially operated as the West Pennine Regional Adoption Agency but, following substantial consultation, has been rebranded as Adoption NoW.

Approval was given by the Leaders and Lead Members and Directors of Children’s Services of the six Councils and the Chief Executives and Board Chairs of the VAA’s for
the development of a RAA bid. The bid was successful and funding was provided by the DFE to formally establish the RAA.

It is intended that the RAA will go live in the Autumn, working groups have been in place and have reported into the RAA partnership Board. At a local level staff have been engaged, consultation is currently under way, Trade Unions have been briefed and the Lead Portfolio member has been engaged throughout.

**Recommendation**

It is recommended that Cabinet support the proposals for the formal establishment of the Adoption NoW Regional Adoption Agency and the proposed creation of a Regional Adoption Agency Steering Committee.

The proposal is consistent with the Greater Manchester devolution aims for collaboration, the move towards increased collaboration between North West Local Authorities and the Government’s agenda to establish regional adoption agencies.

It is requested that Cabinet approve delegated authority to the Lead Member for Safeguarding for any decisions required as the RAA continues to develop.
Cabinet

Adoption NoW Regional Adoption Agency

1. Background

1.1 In its January 2013 publication: Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes, the Coalition Government outlined a vision of a new adoption system, particularly focusing on the adopter recruitment challenge. It set out that a system is needed where there were fewer organisations recruiting and assessing adopters with most of these organisations operating at a much greater scale.

1.2 Since then, the Adoption Leadership Board and Regional Adoption Boards have been introduced, there has been a growth in regional collaboration and consortia arrangements and a significant increase in the number of adopters approved.

1.3 In June 2015, the Department for Education issued its publication: Regionalising Adoption. This set out the Government's aim for “all children with an adoption plan to find a loving, stable home as quickly as possible.” The view expressed was that the national system was not working well enough for children waiting to be adopted, particularly for children that are harder to place. Regionalising Adoption also indicated that further development of the adoption support market is needed so that the right services are available to adoptive families wherever they live. The Government’s stated position was that they want all local authorities to be part of regional adoption agencies by the end of this Parliament. £4.5m of start-up funding was made available to support partnerships wishing to be early adopters to take forward their proposals.

1.4 In addition to the proposal for provide start-up funding, the Government indicated that it intended to bring forward legislation in the Education and Adoption Bill to compel unwilling local authorities to join Regional Adoption Agencies to do so. In these circumstances, it seemed therefore to be sensible to look to develop a coalition of willing local authorities and voluntary partners in the North West.

1.5 The Government subsequently legislated to provide powers in the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to require local authority adoption services to regionalise where they were not making voluntary plans to do so by 2020. Planning is required to have started by 2017 with entry into a regional adoption agency being completed by 2020.

2. Partnership Development

2.1 As a result of discussion between Adoption Leads from a number of agencies, a partnership emerged comprising two Voluntary Agencies, and six Local Authorities. The partnership initially operated as the West Pennine Regional Adoption Agency but, following substantial consultation, has been rebranded as Adoption NoW.

2.2 Approval was given by the Leaders and Lead Members and Directors of Children’s Services of the six Councils and the Chief Executives and Board Chairs of the VAA’s for the development of an RAA bid. The bid was successful and funding was provided by the DFE to promote the development of the RAA.

2.3 The initial RAA proposal set out a plan to build on the strengths of the individual partners and on existing collaborative working arrangements. All participant agencies have been active members of Adoption 22, the consortium of North West adoption agencies which has worked together to match children and prospective adopters across the region. There have been existing collaboration arrangements within the group on recruitment, preparation and training of adopters and there are existing, productive partnerships with the Voluntary Agencies.

2.4 The learning from best practice and innovation in each of the participant agencies and from other Regional Adoption Agencies will be embedded in the practice of Adoption NoW, with a particular focus on improving availability of adopters and addressing the current
difficulties in placing harder to place children. In the medium term, it is expected that increased efficiency in the recruitment of adopters within Adoption NoW will generate cost savings for participant Local Authorities, though the initial aim is to focus on improving quality of services.

3. **Aims and Objectives**

3.1 The Adoption NoW Regional Adoption Agency (the RAA) will create a single regional service operating across six Local Authorities areas in partnership with the two Voluntary Agencies.

3.2 The RAA will provide a service which has the flexibility and resilience to adapt and manage the needs of children for adoptive placements, the supply of adopters to meet those needs and which provides placement choice and high quality adoption support services. The RAA will maximise the contribution that adoption can make to achieving legal permanence and the best possible outcomes for children by building on partners’ individual and collective expertise and strengths. The vision is to “achieve timely adoption for each child with an adoption plan, regardless of age, ethnicity, disability or sibling status; promote identity and provide lifelong support to everyone involved in the adoption”.

3.3 The RAA aims to create a distinct regional agency, focusing on positive approaches to permanence; build on existing excellent practice and innovation; drive outstanding performance; ensure that the voice of adopted children and of adopters shapes the service design and delivery. The RAA will achieve and support as many adoptions as possible within the region; maximise flexibility, effectiveness, and efficiency of resource use; and ensure the quality and sustainability of adoption services in the sub region.

3.4 The RAA’s initial focus will be recruitment, assessment and training of adopters, improving family finding and matching, including maximising opportunities through concurrent planning and fostering to adopt and developing an improved range of post adoption support.

4 **Governance**

4.1 It is proposed that a Regional Adoption Agency Steering Committee is established to oversee and monitor the development and progress of the RAA. The Steering Committee will comprise of one representative from each Voluntary Adoption Agency Board and the Lead Member for Children’s Services from each Local Authority (or their designated deputy). The Steering Committee will meet quarterly and the Regional Adoption Agency Board will provide progress reports to the Committee on all aspects of the RAA.

4.2 A Regional Adoption Agency Board which includes the six Local Authority Children’s Services Assistant Directors and the Chief Executives of the two Voluntary Adoption Agencies was established at the beginning of the RAA application process and has overseen the development of the RAA. The Board is chaired by the Director of People Services from the host authority. A Regional Adoption Agency Manager has been appointed and she has begun the development of an Operational Group containing service leads from each agency.

4.3 The Board will be responsible for the strategic development, leadership, performance and evaluation of the RAA. The Board will also be responsible for the co-ordination of the appointment of staff. RAA staff will be seconded from local authorities, or co-located from voluntary agencies. A legal agreement has been developed, which sets out the arrangements for the provision of adoption services in the RAA.

5. **Structure and Functions**

5.1 The core business of the Regional Adoption Agency is to deliver the following services :-

1. Provide a high quality and efficient family finding service for children who have a plan for adoption.

2. Services for adopters to include :-
a) Delivery of an effective recruitment strategy for adopters that results in a supply of adopters to meet the needs of 60% rising to 80% of the RAA’s children.
b) Prepare, assess and approve prospective adopters in line with statutory timeframes.
3. Provide adoption panels to meet the need of the six local authorities
4. Support the panels through the role of a panel advisor and advise and support the Agency Decision Maker in each authority in the process of deciding that a child should be placed for adoption and matching a child with adopters.
5. Provide adoption support services for adopters and adopted children / adults.
6. Host regional adoption agency commission for birth parent support.
7. For those authorities who hold children’s adoption cases in their adoption teams then to support them to continue to do so within the RAA.
8. To support each of the six local authorities in care planning and considering adoption as a permanent option for children at the earliest opportunity.

5.2 These service will be delivered under three work streams :-
1. Care planning and family finding
2. Adopter recruitment and assessment
3. Adoption support

The main tasks within these areas are as follows :-

5.3 Care planning / family finding
- Find families for all the children who have a plan for adoption
- Utilise the RAA IT system to link potential families with children
- Utilise national and local methods for family finding such as activity days, exchange days, Linkmaker, National Adoption Register etc. Prepare and support children in these events as required.
- Provide support to help social workers prepare children for adoption and in some cases provide a worker to do that preparation.
- Provide a worker to attend early care planning meetings in each local authority to advise on permanence options and in particular in relation to early permanence.
- Advise children’s social workers in the process of preparing paperwork for SHOBPA and matching.
- Providing a duty system to ensure that there is always advise available on issues relating to adoption
- For those authorities that hold children’s adoption cases, supporting them to continue to do so.
- Provide information and court statement (as required) to advise courts about availability of families and prospects of successful adoption for children.

5.4 Adoption Support
- Respond to all requests for support received from adopters – this may be to offer advice, signpost to another service, provide a short intervention or provide a full assessment of need that may lead to therapeutic work or other forms of support being offered.
- Support the process of ‘adoption support fund’ applications
- Support staff with therapeutic skills to utilise those skills effectively within the RAA.
- Provide a range of adoption support events across the RAA including social events, training events, groups for children and adopters.
- Commission some therapeutic support services (on a case by case basis).
- Ensure that referrals to local authorities are made when thresholds are met for ‘child in need’ or ‘child protection’.
- Provide support to adult adoptees seeking information about birth relatives and / or wishing to access their adoption records.
- Support birth parents with letter box arrangements and promoting access to independent birth parent provision.

5.5 Adopter assessment and recruitment
- Deliver against an effective adopter recruitment strategy
- Build on existing data and develop RAA data to evidence ‘what works’ in recruitment across the region.
- Develop specialist recruitment services for Asian heritage adopters.
- Provide recruitment events, activities and advertising campaigns
- Develop and maintain an effective web site for the RAA
- Provide a duty system to respond effectively and efficiently to prospective adopters
- Provide preparation groups for prospective adopters
- Assess and approve adopters within the required timeframe
- Support adopters through the process of being approved at panel, finding a child and that child being matched and placed through to the making of the adoption order.

6. **Recommendation:**

6.1 It is recommended that Cabinet support the proposals for the formal establishment of the Adoption NoW Regional Adoption Agency and the proposed creation of a Regional Adoption Agency Steering Committee

6.2 The proposal is consistent with the Greater Manchester devolution aims for collaboration, the move towards increased collaboration between North West Local Authorities and the Government’s agenda to establish regional adoption agencies.

6.3 It is requested that Cabinet approve delegated authority to the Lead Member for Safeguarding for any decisions required as the RAA continues to develop

7. **Consultation**

Full Consultation has taken place with all staff, members and the Trade Unions.

8. **Financial Implications**

The finance model for the RAA is still being developed. A watching brief will be kept on the progress of the RAA and the financial implications will be considered and reported on as they arise. To date DfE grant funding has been utilised to develop and set up the RAA at a GM level. (Andy Cooper)

9. **Legal Services Comments**

Legal issues are discussed in the main body of the report (Colin Brittain)

10. **Co-operative Agenda**

The RAA should strengthen the collaborative approach to adoption and will aim to Increase numbers of prospective adopters, improve adoption timeliness and increase numbers of children adopted.

11. **Human Resources Comments**

11.1 Throughout the development of the RAA the Adoption Service staff have been engaged, the Team manager from Oldham Adoption Service has been seconded and working as part of the RAA project team.

11.2 Formal consultation with the staff is underway as some staff will be expected to work from the Hub whilst other staff remain in the Oldham spoke.

11.3 The proposal is that all staff are initially seconded into the RAA under their current terms and conditions via a secondment agreement. We will be discussing the content of this as part of consultation with the staff and Trade Unions.

11.4 There will be ongoing discussions around the future operating model which may have further staffing implications. We will however, continue to engage the staff and Trades
Unions through our normal channels as discussions progress. (Emma Gilmartin, HR Business Partner)

12. **Risk Assessments**
   - N/A

13. **IT Implications**
   13.1 The RAA will be using a standalone case management system, hosted by the Hub Council. It is understood that there will not be any immediate requirements to integrate the RAA system with Oldham’s Mosaic social care system. However, this may need to be considered in the future.

   13.2 RAA staff seconded from Oldham Council will require access to local networks and systems, as well as the central RAA system within the hub. Technical solutions for providing the necessary access for RAA staff will need to be fully scoped and assessed prior to implementation. There will be a full assessment of the information governance implications of the proposed solutions. (Alison Odongo)

14. **Property Implications**
   - The host Council has provided the Hub space at no additional costs to the other Council’s

15. **Procurement Implications**
   - N/A

16. **Environmental and Health & Safety Implications**
   - N/A

17. **Equality, community cohesion and crime implications**
   - N/A

18. **Equality Impact Assessment Completed?**
   - No

19. **Key Decision**
   - Yes.

20. **Key Decision Reference**
   - SCS-08-17

21. **Background Papers**
   - N/A

22. **Appendices**
   - None