

Cabinet

18 November 2020

**Regional Adoption Agency – Full
Business Case**

Ordinary Decision



Report of Corporate Management Team

**John Pearce, Corporate Director of Children and Young People's
Services**

**Cllr Olwyn Gunn, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young
People's Services**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide.

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The full business case (attached in Appendix 2) for the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) – Adopt Coast to Coast sets out the Partnership Model agreement reached by Durham, Cumbria and Together for Children/Sunderland to work collaboratively to develop and deliver their respective adoption services under the leadership of the Regional Adoption Agency Head of Service whose joint appointment all have agreed.

Executive summary

- 2 The Council has responded to the Government requirements to move to RAAs where its aspiration is to have fewer organisations recruiting and assessing adopters and having organisations that are operating at much greater scale.
- 3 This intention was set out in the Education and Adoption Act 2016 which introduced power in March 2018 for the Secretary of State to require local authorities to carry out their adoption functions jointly.
- 4 The Government's vision for the future of adoption services and provision in England encompasses:

- (a) a system where children are matched with the most suitable adopter as quickly as possible;
 - (b) improved targeted recruitment taking place at an efficient scale to provide a pool of 'adoption ready' adopters large enough and well enough matched to the needs of children waiting;
 - (c) improved and sufficient high-quality adoption support services available nationwide;
 - (d) potential for efficiency savings avoiding duplication and operating on a greater scale.
- 5 Significant work has been undertaken since the last report to Cabinet in December 2018 which sought approval for further work to develop a hosted model. A number of practical issues were raised about the hosted model due in the main to the large geographic footprint of the proposed Coast to Coast Adoption Agency.
- 6 Following discussions with the Department for Education (DfE) it was agreed to look at alternative models that were being developed nationally. This time period has enabled the Local Authorities to explore a newer RAA Model that provides a better fit for Adopt Coast to Coast.
- 7 The Partnership Model is one which the respective Local Authorities believe enables the necessary collaboration to achieve the vision set out by the Government. Adopt Coast to Coast as a Partnership Model will be delivered through a Hub and Spoke structure.
- 8 The Hub will initially be based in County Durham and has been kept deliberately small and cost effective. It will consist of the RAA Head of Service and a Communications and Marketing Officer and will have access to a number of support services such as Performance and Finance which will be provided in kind from each of the three partners. The Hub costs will be shared equally by each Local Authority.
- 9 There will be three spokes:
- (a) Cumbria;
 - (b) Durham;
 - (c) Together for Children.
- 9 The staff in the spokes will continue to be employed by their existing organisations and work together to achieve the shared vision for Adopt Coast to Coast:

“children will achieve their full potential within a loving and secure family, and everyone affected by adoption will receive a high-quality innovative and sustainable service”

- 10 The RAA Head of Service has been appointed and took up the post on 1 September 2020. The line management of the RAA Head of Service will be undertaken by Head of Children’s Social Care, Durham.
- 11 The Key milestones for the project are:
 - (a) Full Business Case approved by all three partners – November 2020;
 - (b) Shadow Go Live – 1st February 2021;
 - (c) Live – 1 April 2021.
- 12 To meet the Government’s deadline for go live (early Spring 2021) there has been a significant investment of time in developing an agreed model of practice for Adopt Coast to Coast. The modelling has had the advantage of the learning from the RAAs that have gone live both regionally and nationally.
- 13 The detailed proposals are set out in the appended Full Business Case which will require agreement by the DfE.

Recommendation

- 14 Cabinet is recommended to approve:
 - (a) the Full Business Case for establishing Adopt Coast to Coast Regional Adoption Agency with Cumbria County Council, Durham County Council and Together for Children / Sunderland City Council.

Background

- 15 In 2016 the DfE in its legislation and guidance was clear about the requirement for all Local Authorities to be part of the national RAA programme. The region split to the north where Northumberland, Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Gateshead agreed to establish a hosted model RAA and all of the Teesside Authorities, including Darlington to the south of the region also established a hosted model RAA.
- 14 In seeking to comply with the national direction of travel for Local Authority Adoption Services Durham commenced discussions with Sunderland (now Together for Children) and Cumbria in 2016. The Adopt Coast to Coast vision was realised and the partnership of three Local Authorities who all have Adoption Services rated Good by Ofsted, has provided a strong foundation for continued collaborative working in the intervening period.
- 15 A DfE grant has enabled the development of the model and practice across the 3 Local Authorities in conjunction with the 4 Voluntary Adoption Agencies which have office bases in the geographical footprint of Adopt Coast to Coast.
- 16 The remaining funds available in the DfE grant will meet the ongoing support and development costs of the RAA ahead of the go live launch.

Conclusion

- 17 Cabinet is respectfully asked to approve the Full Business Case for Adopt Coast to Coast to enable a formal launch on 1 April 2021.

Background papers

- Cabinet report dated 12 December 2018 entitled 'Regional Adoption Agency Arrangements'

Other useful documents

- Business case appendix 2

Author(s)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The Council is under a legal duty to maintain an adoption service for its area. The Department for Education has expressed its desire for Local Authorities to establish Regional Adoption Agencies with partner LAs and Voluntary Adoptions Agencies. Failure to do so may lead to a direction for the Secretary of State to enter into such an arrangement.

Finance

The finance model proposed for Adopt Coast to Coast is that the current Adoption Service's budget shall remain in each respective Local Authority. As such and in the best interests of the partnership each Local Authority will agree that there will be no material changes to the current structure without consultation with the other partners where this may impact on the future managerial or financial arrangements.

The hub costs will be the responsibility of the RAA Head of Service, and each Local Authority will contribute 1/3 of these, c£50K.

There will be an element of the budget such as Adoption Support and Interagency Fees which are jointly controlled by the Local Authority and RAA.

The RAA Head of Service will have oversight of the Interagency Adoption Fees, Adoption Allowances, and Post Adoption Support Commissioned Services for each of the Local Authorities, to enable efficiencies to be achieved with accountability through the Governance Board.

A budget will be established in the Hub authority with the Contributions from the two partner authorities recorded as income. Any over or underspends at the year-end will be distributed as equal thirds between the three partner authorities.

The budget will be monitored internally as part of the hub authority's usual internal governance cycle with quarterly outturn reports being presented to the RAA Governance Board for review.

The RAA Head of Service will produce an annual financial report summarising adoption activity across the RAA including a breakdown of direct placement costs and statistics relating to the timeliness of the adoption process.

Set-up costs will be funded by the DfE grant held by Durham County Council until this is exhausted and only if this insufficient should any remaining costs be shared between the three Local Authorities.

Consultation

As part of the development work prior to the formal launch the RAA Head of Service will take the lead in developing and maintaining the active participation of Stakeholder groups who are affected by Adoption.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable.

Climate Change

None.

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

None.

Staffing

Two new posts are being created in the Hub; the RAA Head of Service post is recruited to and the Communications and Marketing Officer is to be advertised. There are no other implications for staffing in the 3 hubs as all current staff within the three Local Authority Adoption services are remaining employed within their own Local Authorities.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

Should Adopt Coast to Coast not go live on 1 April 2020, the Secretary of State could make directions for all or any of Durham County Council's Adoption functions to be undertaken by another Agency.

Procurement

Not applicable.

Appendix 2: Full Business Case

See Appendix 2 attached.