

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE - 13 JUNE 2016
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY
SERVICES
REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY

Purpose of the report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with information about national changes to local authority adoption arrangements, in particular the introduction of Regional Adoption Agencies, and the implications for Leicestershire's current practice.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. In March 2016 the government published the Education and Adoption Act 2016 and a few days later the report: 'Adoption – A Vision for Change'. The Act provides the legislative powers for local authority adoption functions to be 'joint arrangements'.

Background

3. In March 2012 the coalition government published 'An Action Plan for Adoption – tackling delay'. This set out an ambition to improve the recruitment of adopters and tackle delay.
4. A single national adoption information service was established in 2013 alongside a new, quicker two-stage process for approving adopters.
5. To ensure a sustained, long term focus on adoption, The Adoption Leadership Board was formed in 2014, chaired by Sir Martin Narey. It's membership consists of local government representatives and the voluntary adoption sector.
6. The Children and Families Act 2014 made it possible to create 'fostering for adoption' placements, and introduced adopter-led matching through National Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days, where prospective parents and children can meet face to face in a friendly environment.
7. In May 2015, the Adoption Support Fund came into operation. This £19 million of new resource pays for therapeutic interventions that help children to deal with past trauma and provides adoptive families with support when they need it. Local Authorities are required to apply to the Fund.

8. In June 2015, Edward Timpson, Minister for Children and Families, announced the intention to create Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). In his letter to local authorities in February 2016, Edward Timpson stated that:

“My expectation is that the RAAs will deliver all adopter recruitment, matching and support functions, unless there is an exceptions reason otherwise. RAAs will have one ‘pool’ of adopters and one ‘pool’ of children... (and) can of course take on wider functions and I am interested in those projects”.

9. In March 2016 the government published the Education and Adoption Act 2016 and a few days later their report: ‘Adoption – A Vision for Change’. The Act provides the legislative powers for local authority adoption functions to be ‘joint arrangements’. The report sets out the intention to establish RAAs by the end of this parliament whereby:

“All local authorities will be part of an RAA or will have delegated their adoption functions to an RAA”. Furthermore, that: “If some local authorities fail to do so by 2017, we will consider using the powers in the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to require them to make arrangements for their adoption functions to be carried out by a RAA.”

East Midlands’ developments

10. In anticipation of the legislative changes, the East Midlands directors of children’s services bid for, and were successful in receiving DfE funding to explore RAA options. The funding has been used to appoint a Project Manager, appointed and managed by Lincolnshire County Council, to develop an options appraisal.
11. A Project Governance Board has been established. The Project Governance Board includes elected Member representation through David Mellen, Lead Member for Nottingham City Council. The Project Board is chaired by the newly appointed director of children’s services for Nottinghamshire County Council, Colin Pettigrew. The role of the Project Governance Board is to develop proposals and make recommendations regarding the form and function of the proposed RAA for presentation to and consideration by the 8 individual local authorities (Northamptonshire is not part of this arrangement). It is a requirement of the government that Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) are part of any arrangement. The VAAs currently working with East Midlands authorities are: Adopt Together, Coram East Midlands, and Family Care.
12. Regionalisation can take many forms and it is important that the East Midlands project considers a wide range of options. The DfE has made it clear that:
- Agencies are *not* required to set up a new legal entity;
 - Solutions may build on *existing relationships and consortia arrangements*;
 - Collaboration should cover *recruitment, matching and support*.

13. It is intended that a report on progress to date, including the viability assessment of a number of options, is presented to the directors of children's services at their meeting in June and a full report to Lead Members at their next regional meeting in September. The recent letter from Edward Timpson makes it clear that: "it is absolutely vital that you take the time to develop an RAA (that) suits your local needs (and that) your project has the appropriate level of senior engagement".
14. The work to date in the East Midlands was reported to the DfE in May and, subject to approval, this will enable the remainder of the project funding to be released. The current Project Plan sets out an intention to make available a final specification by the end of this calendar year with an intention to present to the various local authorities Cabinet's in March 2017.

Leicestershire data

15. Leicestershire's adoption performance is reported on a quarterly basis to the Lead Member and to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The 2015/16 end of year (Quarter 4) performance data will be presented to the Committee at the same meeting that this report, on national and regional change, is being considered. The data below relates to the last report received by the Committee, regarding Quarter 3.
16. There was a significant increase in the numbers of children adopted in 2013/14 (58) compared to the previous year (22), this had levelled to 45 in 2015/16 at the end of Quarter 3.
17. Also, at the end of Quarter 3, there were 12 children waiting to be adopted. At the same time, there were 36 households waiting for a child. There has been a significant slowing down in the number of placement orders granted by the family court as a result of nationally disputed court judgements.
18. At the end of Quarter 3, Leicestershire had made 25 applications to the Adoption Support Fund referenced at paragraph 7, the largest number of applications made in the East Midlands. This has drawn down in excess of £100,000.

Resource Implications

19. The current budget for the Fostering, Adoptions and Placements team is approximately £2.5m. Work is currently under way to separate the expenditure across these services, albeit that some are inextricably linked. Until the options appraisals for the Regional Adoption Agency are made available it is not possible to fully understand the financial implications of change. Needless to say, any change will need to be managed within the current financial envelope, and, if possible, a reduced budget.

Conclusion

20. Leicestershire's adoption performance is good and any regional arrangement will need to ensure that there is added value in the system and improvements in outcomes for children.
21. It is clear that there is no option but to move to a regional arrangement. Leicestershire officers have been actively involved in some of the development work that will contribute to the options appraisal. It is not yet known what the implications will be for local Adoption Panels.
22. Lead Members will be provided with further information at the next regional meeting and a further report will be made available to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2016.

Background Papers

Adoption: a vision for change - <http://ow.ly/2Xnh300QgwJ>

Circulation Under Local Issues Alert Procedure

None.

Officers to Contact

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Equality and Human Rights Implications

23. Most of the human rights of children relating to adoption are set out in International and European standards and include: the right to a family life; the best interests of the child; the requirement to safeguard; and the fitness to adopt.