

**REPORT TO:** Executive Board

**DATE:** 19 January 2017

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director, People

**PORTFOLIO:** Children, Young People and Families

**SUBJECT:** Regional Adoption Agency Update

**WARD(S)** Borough-wide

**1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 To inform and update members on progress towards a Regional Adoption Agency and the decisions taken under delegated authority by the Strategic Director: People and the Lead Member for Children, Young People and Families.

**2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That Members note this summary report for the full and detailed business case and inter-authority agreement and in particular the following points:**

**a) The inter-authority agreement which sets out the legal and governance arrangements for the RAA, the role of the Lead Member in the partnership board which will oversee the RAA, how future finance and budgets will be agreed and the notice period of any partner wishers to withdraw (Section 5)**

**b) The current basis for funding the RAA being based on levels of activity directly relating to numbers of children with a confirmed plan for adoption (Section 9). Halton's contribution of 15% of the overall budget will be £318,114 which is slightly below the current budget. Any efficiencies identified will be used to invest in the RAA as it transitions to its new partnership.**

**c) The service will be named Adopt Together and Wigan will be the delivery local authority. There will be a "hub" based in Warrington but social workers will still use Halton as a base on a regular basis.**

**d) The service offer is outlined in Section 4 and staff will be consulted on the detail in the New Year.**

## 3.0 **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### 3.1 **Section 1: Introduction and background**

3.1.1 Warrington, Wigan, St Helens, Halton and Cheshire West and Chester RAA project board envisages a regional adoption service which:

- provides all children with an adoptive family that meets their needs;
- ensures that those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice that they need to understand their adoption journey; and
- ensures that RAA families are well prepared, enabled and supported to care for the children with plans for adoption.

3.1.2 The RAA is being developed in the context of government policy to regionalise adoption through the establishment of regional adoption agencies as set out in the Education and Adoption Bill (2015). The RAA project has been granted up to £639K by the Department for Education to establish the RAA by 1 June 2017.

3.1.3 Key partners to the development of the RAA are: Warrington Borough Council, Wigan Council, St Helens Council, Halton Council, Cheshire West and Chester Council, Adoption Matters, Caritas Care, Nugent Care and After Adoption.

3.1.4 The five local authorities have agreed that the RAA will be a shared local authority service, that Wigan Council will provide the service and Cheshire West and Chester Council will act as the lead commissioner and, that staff in scope for the service will be seconded to Wigan (with a formal review after one year of operation).

3.1.5 The development of the RAA is funded by the Department of Education. Delays in the release of funding by the DfE are reflected in the revised project plan for the RAA. The 'go live' date for the RAA is now set at 1 June 2017 to ensure that the final project funding settlement is not limited to the financial year 2016-17.

### 3.2 **Section 2: Reasons for change**

3.2.1 Regionalising adoption offers an opportunity to improve economies of scale and reduce fragmentation of the system. It is the stated intent of government that all local authority adoption services will be regionalised by 2020.

3.2.2 A larger pool of adopters improves the likelihood of placing a child with an adoptive family who best meets their needs in a timely way.

A larger pool of adopters also increases the chances of finding such a placement from within the RAA pool, reducing the need to place children with external agencies.

- 3.2.3 The RAA, with an increased focus on adoption by all local authorities, has forecast an increase of 23% of children who will need adoptive families and the proposed model should be able to provide placements for 80% of these children (an increase of 5%).
- 3.2.4 Adoption support is a growing area of business and the development of the RAA allows a full review of the services on offer and a clear rationale for the adoption service offer in the future. This is particularly important in the context of diminishing government grants to fund inter-agency placements or adoption support activities. It also provides greater clarity to external providers, particularly voluntary adoption agencies, about the areas of business that the RAA will seek to commission.

### 3.3 **Section 3: Scope**

#### 3.3.1 The RAA will:

- provide all children from Warrington, Wigan, St Helens, Halton and Cheshire West and Chester with an adoptive family that meets their needs, either from the RAA pool of adopters or through inter-agency arrangements with other regional adoption agencies or voluntary adoption agencies.
- ensure that those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice that they need to understand their adoption journey.
- ensure that RAA families are well prepared, enabled and supported to care for the children with plans for adoption support.

3.3.2 Across the five local authorities and average of 5.7% of children in the care of the local authority go on to be matched with an adoptive family. For Halton the number of children who go on to be matched is 6%. Over the last 5 years across the footprint, 110 children have been matched' in Halton this varies from 9 children in 2012/13 and 14 children in 2014/15.

3.3.3 The average number of days between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (for children who have been adopted) varies across the region. From 2012 to 2015, the average ranged from 503 days in Cheshire West and Chester to 655 days in Wigan, compared to a national average of 593 days and in Halton 426 days.

3.3.4 A key challenge for the RAA will be to ensure that children in the 'hard to place' category are matched with families willing and able to meet their needs in a timely fashion and that, where possible

(without delaying a match), the adopter is matched from within the RAA. Adoption matches were found for 113 children within this category during 2012-2015 representing 34% of the total number of matches made.

3.3.5 Over the three year period 2012 and 2015, the five local authorities placed 334 children. Of these, 75% were placed with the local authority's adopters or with adopters from a partner local authority. The remaining 25% of children were placed with adopters from local authorities outside the partnership (14%) or with VAA adopters (11%). Predictions for 2015/16 suggest the total number of children adopted across the authorities will be 141. This represents, on average, an additional 28 children per year to be adopted across the region (approx. 23% increase).

3.3.6 Services and functions which are within the scope of the RAA have been identified are set out in Section 4 together with the services and functions which remain the responsibility of individual local authorities. A number of services and functions will be commissioned from external providers which will be largely Tier 3 post adoption support as outlined in Section 4.

#### 3.4 **Section 4: Service offer, skills and staff**

3.4.1 The RAA will offer the following services:

##### 3.4.1.1 Recruitment and assessment of adopters

- It is forecast that the RAA will be required to find placements for up to 141 children per year (23% increase on current level) and, therefore, will need to identify 109 families (16 % increase on current level) to meet these children's needs. Recruitment and assessment social workers and assistants will also take on other functions such as liaison with local authority child care workers for early identification, family finding and support for life story work.
- Local Authority staff will remain responsible for confirming the matching of a child with an adoptive placement. The RAA will be responsible for sourcing and family finding those placements based on the individual childrens needs.

##### 3.4.1.2 Matching and panels

- The RAA will run a panel each week, providing approximately 50 panels per year and considering up to 141 matching decisions and 109 adopter approval decisions. This equates to a case load of five key decisions on matching and approvals at each panel and provides capacity for considering disruptions, withdrawals and other items of business. Weekly panels will provide all

partner local authorities an opportunity to improve the timeliness of decision making in relation to matching and adopter approval.

#### 3.4.1.3 Adoption support

- Pre-adoption support assessments and support planning at the point of the decision by the Agency Decision Maker in the Local Authority that the child should be placed for adoption. Post adoption support assessments and support planning for all relevant children/families in the first 3 years of the placement or at the request of a partner local authority (at any time in during the adoptive placement), for example alongside a joint assessment for a child in need.
- Provision of tier 1 and tier 2 adoption support services as set out in the assessment for the first three years of placement for all relevant families. Tier 1 adoption support includes training/workshops for adoptive parents and the development and support of an adoption community. Tier 2 adoption support services for the RAA includes Theraplay, AdOpt and Nurtured Heart and are included in the service offer by the RAA. Tier 3 (commissioned) bespoke adoption support provision will be funded by the relevant local authority partner after considering the findings of the adoption support assessment and the outcome of an application for Adoption Support Fund assistance.
- Access to records (schedule 2) and schedule 2 counselling for those adopted before 1975.
- Letter box and post adoption contact support.

3.4.2 Two options for staffing the RAA have been considered – The preferred option (B) has a staffing complement which will consist of a service manager, 2 fte principal managers, 2 fte practice managers, 1 fte panel adviser, 19 fte social workers, 5.5 fte family support/social work assistants and 4 fte admin staff. This option provides resilience in the social care teams and reduces the likelihood of staff being at risk of redundancy. The total staff cost is £1,454,865 and is within the parameters of the budget for staffing in the RAA. Business support functions will be provided by individual local authorities on a 'buy back' basis for key business functions, and at no cost for functions such as HR and legal advice.

3.4.3 There has been ongoing engagement with staff, service users and other stakeholders in the design of the service. Formal consultation with staff and unions will take place in February 2016.

### 3.5 **Section 5: Partnership, governance and funding arrangements**

3.5.1 The legal agreements will document the arrangement to establish

and operate the RAA. An inter-authority agreement will record the nature of the partnership and the principles of joint working that will be adopted by the authorities. The agreement will be for a duration of three years with the ability to extend the arrangement for a further two years. There will be a review of the agreement and the operation of the agency after one year.

3.5.2 The agreement will document:

The commitment by Wigan to provide the adoption services on behalf of the RAA to an agreed specification.

The commitment by Cheshire West and Chester to scrutinise and quality assure the services being provided using a performance monitoring framework in the agreement.

Both authorities will be remunerated for those services via a payment mechanism in the agreement.

3.5.3 The inter-authority agreement will set out the expectation that decisions of the partnership board will be by consensus. In the event of a dispute that cannot be resolved by the partnership board, the issue will be referred to the chief executives of the partner local authorities to consider. The inter-authority agreement will also detail arrangements to dissolve the partnership if the need arises by providing not less than six months' notice.

3.5.4 The inter-authority agreement will provide for the agreed governance structure. A partnership board will consist of both officers and members and will have a remit of oversight and scrutiny. The partnership board will sign off the RAA's business plan, annual budget and staffing structure. The board will meet quarterly and have administrative support and professional advisors. An advisory group and a quality assurance group will meet quarterly to scrutinise and quality assure the provision of adoption services and will report to the partnership board. Direct operational delivery will be undertaken by Wigan Council. Wigan Council will report and provide data to the Board and the two groups.

3.5.5 The five local authorities will jointly fund the RAA and their individual contributions are set out in a funding formula based on the number of children with placement orders made over the three years 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16. The funding formula has been agreed in principle by directors of children's services subject to agreement by cabinet / executive board / chief officer with delegated authority. The budget for the RAA in year one is £2,120,579 and is based on the combined adoption budgets for 2016-17. Future budgets will be proposed by the partnership board for consideration by the partner local authorities.

3.5.6 The secondment agreements will be made between each authority

individually and Wigan. Terms and conditions of staff will remain unchanged.

### 3.6 **Section 6: Organisational structure**

3.6.1 The RAA will bring together adoption staff from across the five partner local authorities into a single shared service. Wigan Council will act as the provider (host) local authority and Cheshire West and Chester Council will act as the lead commissioner on behalf for the RAA partnership.

3.6.2 Agreement has been reached that adoption staff from Warrington, St Helens, Halton and Cheshire West and Chester will be seconded to Wigan Council on current terms and conditions. This arrangement will be reviewed after one year of operation.

3.6.3 The RAA will provide adoption services across the geographical area of Warrington, Wigan, St Helens, Halton and Cheshire West and Chester. A key requirement of the service is that it will operate from 'where the work is'. In practice this means:

- Close and regular working with local authority child care teams in order to ensure early identification of children likely to require an adoptive placement and to effectively collaborate in family finding and matching
- Meeting with potential adopters and providing adoption support services in locations which are convenient to families
- Running panels across the region to ensure continued local engagement with decision making on adopter recruitment and matching.

3.6.4 Operational requirements therefore dictate a 'hub and spoke' organisational model for the RAA. A central hub will be established and 'spoke' locations will be provided by each of the partner local authorities in existing council premises.

3.6.5 RAA staff in scope for locality based working include the recruitment and assessment teams as well as adoption support staff when conducting assessments and developing care plans, and providing direct services such as family support, events and workshops. Staff likely to be based primarily in the hub include senior management, the admin team and adoption support staff who deliver post-adoption contact such as letterbox and schedule 2 access to records.

3.6.6 A central hub will be established and 'spoke' locations will be provided by each of the partner local authorities in existing council premises. In addition, staff will be enabled to work flexibly from any location (including home working where appropriate) and maintain effective team working through the provision of appropriate ICT

hardware, infrastructure and systems. This flexible working model also provides the advantage of reducing travelling time and costs for staff.

### **3.7 Section 7: Premises**

3.7.1 The RAA will provide adoption services across the geographical area of Warrington, Wigan, St Helens, Halton and Cheshire West and Chester.

3.7.2 Two sites have been shortlisted (from a list of five) as potentially suitable for the RAA hub. These are Bewsey Park Community Centre in Warrington and Leigh Sports Village in Wigan.

3.7.3 An appraisal of the two potential hub locations identifies Bewsey Park Community Centre as the preferred location. Key advantages of Bewsey Park are that it is near the geographical centre of the RAA footprint indicating a commitment to a fully shared and equitable service for all partners and both premises running costs and travel costs for staff are lower than at Leigh Sports Village.

3.7.4 Locality working bases for RAA staff will be provided by local authority partners in current council offices. These will be provided at no cost to the RAA.

### **3.8 Section 8: Systems**

3.8.1 Both proposed sites for the RAA hub will require a new external cabling and a review of the internal cabling in order to link RAA staff to the Wigan Council network and applications.

3.8.2 RAA staff will need to be able to work from any of the spoke locations based in local authority offices. To this end an ICT group from the five local authorities will enable a cross council standard Guest Wifi network to ensure that RAA staff do not need to log on as a guest user each day. Future work on connectivity may include the development of a secure infrastructure and mediated federated services respectively (seamless service and ICT support regardless of the venue).

3.8.3 In order to meet the demands of flexible working, each member of staff will be equipped with a lightweight tablet/laptop and a smart phone. In addition, each 'spoke' location will be equipped with a local printer in the event that a document is required in hard copy. The RAA hub will be equipped with two standard computer terminals (in order to provide back up if a member of staff is temporarily unable to use the tablet/laptop) and 20 VOIP desk phones. In addition, a networked printer/scanner will be provided. Documentation for panel members will be provided electronically via the case management system.



- 3.8.4 The RAA will have a discrete case management system (CMS). This will enable the service to provide reports tailored to each of the five local authorities (this functionality is not currently available in any of the LA ICSs). The CMS is focused on the family record - formal recording of the child's details on the CMS starts once there is a placement order in place for a child. Early identification and tracking will be managed through close working between the local authority child care teams, the RAA and VAAs and monitored via a tracking tool. RAA staff will have read access to local authority children's case management systems and local authority child care staff will have access to potential adopter reports (PAR) from the RAA case management system. There will be training provided to staff on the different recording systems.
- 3.8.5 Wigan Council, on behalf of the RAA, will procure the market leader case management system as a pilot for a period of 1 year (plus 1 year) by December 2016 (to allow sufficient time to configure the system).
- 3.8.6 The RAA will be staffed by practitioners, administrators and managers seconded from each of the partners to the shared service. HR management functions are therefore maintained by the 'home' authority for each member of staff. The decision on the status of staff in the RAA has taken into consideration the difficulties in managing working time, leave, performance management and appraisal activity. Functionality of the arrangements will be considered by the partnership board at the annual review.
- 3.8.7 Detailed drafting of aligned practice, process and protocols across the five local authorities will be conducted from January 2017.

### 3.9 **Section 9: Costs**

- 3.9.1 The budget for adoption services in 2016-17 for each of the participating local authorities is £2,120,759. It is proposed that the combined adoption budget is set as the baseline budget for the RAA for 2017-18.
- 3.9.2 The contribution from each local authority has been determined following consideration of 8 different funding formulas. The recommendation from the Project was that funding based on actual activity related to the adoption work (the number of placement orders granted) for the last 3 years was the most fair and transparent option. For Halton, this equates to 15% of the total budget and a contribution of £318,114. This is in line and slightly below the current budget for 16/17 of £319,100.
- 3.9.3 It should be noted that, in the four years to March 2016, the actual average costs of adoption services were 14% higher than the budget set for 2016-17. All five local authorities spent more on

adoption services than is identified in their adoption budgets for 2016-17. The proposed staffing and organisational arrangements for the RAA are assumed to release some efficiencies such as the ability to use in-house adoption placements rather than external placements at cost. Efficiencies will be invested into the service although unanticipated costs may arise. Any such risk will be mitigated by close monitoring of the RAA budget by the partnership board.

- 3.9.4 The combined local authority 2016-17 budgets include staffing, fees for inter-agency placement (net of income), activity budgets e.g. for adoption support activities, setting in grants and adoption panel costs.
- 3.9.5 The combined 2015-16 budget does not include back office costs such as ICT, premises, HR, legal services, performance and financial management, commissioning services and insurances. These costs have been difficult to quantify although further work is underway to do so. The majority of back office costs may not be cashable and some will continue to be provided by partner local authorities at no cost to the RAA.
- 3.9.6 Adoption support allowances have not been included in the calculation for the RAA budget. Funding specialist adoption support activity remains the responsibility of the relevant local authority.
- 3.9.7 It is calculated that the funding envelope for the RAA is sufficient for the RAA activity. This is based on consideration of caseloads and staff required to deliver the service along with historical costs for inter-agency placements and a range of adoption support activities. As a larger agency which ensures that children are placed for adoption much quicker, it is anticipated that the efficiencies that result will be able to be re-invested in the service and that the budget going forward will be sufficient to meet the increased numbers of children being placed for adoption.

### 3.10 **Section 10: Expected benefits**

- 3.10.1 The expected benefits of the RAA have been identified and focus on performance and quality baseline which will inform a detailed service specification to be agreed by the project board. In addition, the performance management and quality assurance framework set out a range of performance and quality evaluation measures, (including the volumes of activity within the RAA and the outcomes/impact required).
- 3.10.2 The outcomes that this framework will evidence is that for children where it is the plan for adoption are matched with suitable adopters quicker, as we will have a wider pool of adopters to choose from, and that recruitment and approval of adopters is swift and links to

the identified needs of children, particularly in targeting children who are older, part of a sibling group or who have a disability.

### 3.11 **Section 11: Next steps**

#### 3.11.1 Project

|   |  |                   |
|---|--|-------------------|
| Grant for RAA project formally confirmed        | DfE  | Mid-December 2016 |
| Draft 1 business case approved for distribution | RAA project board  | 23 November 2016  |
| Recommendations considered and amended          | Relevant senior leadership teams   | 30 November 2016  |
| Final business case approved                    | Via delegation to the Strategic Director People in consultation with the Lead Member | January 2017      |
| Agree proposals for branding of the RAA         | RAA project board  | 23 February 2017  |
| RAA shadow service operational                  | RAA project board  | 1 April 2017      |
| RAA fully established                           | RAA project board  | 1 July 2017       |

#### 3.11.2 Staffing and skills

|  |                          |               |
|--|--------------------------|---------------|
| RAA service manager starts                       | RAA service manager      | By April 2017 |
| Consultation with staff                          | Local authority HR leads | February 2017 |
| Final service structure and staffing agreed      | RAA project board        | March 2017    |
| Recruit to and confirm RAA staffing appointments | RAA project board        | March 2017    |

#### 3.11.3 Partnership and governance arrangements

|   |  |                  |
|---|--|------------------|
| Inter-authority agreement agreed  | Relevant senior leadership teams                       | 31 December 2016 |
| Service specification and performance management/ quality assurance framework agreed. | RAA project board and relevant senior leadership teams | Mid-March 2017   |

#### 3.11.4 Premises

|   |                 |                   |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|
| Hub prepared for RAA including ICT infrastructure | Project manager | By mid-April 2017 |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|

#### 3.11.5 Systems

|   |                                  |                   |
|---|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Set up case management system and train staff             | Provider and RAA service manager | By end April 2017 |
| Local authority connectivity established                  | ICT group                        | 1 April 2017      |
| Staff issued with new ICT equipment and training provided | Wigan ICT provider               | 1 April 2017      |
| Practice, processes and protocols established             | RAA service manager              | By mid-May 2017   |

#### 3.11.6 Costs

|  |               |                      |
|--|---------------|----------------------|
| Identify cost of back-office functions | Finance group | By end February 2017 |
|--|---------------|----------------------|

#### 3.11.7 Expected benefits

|   |                 |                     |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|
| Baseline for performance and quality assurance determined | Project Manager | By end January 2017 |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|

### 4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 Regional Adoption Agencies are being established under the government direction and failure to be part of an RAA could lead to the local authority being directed to be part of one.

### 5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 Finance management and the process for resolving disputes and future financial implications are set in the governance arrangements for the RAA.

## 6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

### 6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

Where a child has a plan for adoption, the RAA will improve the range of adopters to meet different childrens needs and the level of support to those adopters and childrens post-adoption.

### 6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

None identified.

### 6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

None identified.

### 6.4 **A Safer Halton**

None identified.

### 6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

None identified.

## 7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

### 7.1 Key risks include:

- Staff face uncertainty leading to poor morale
- Insufficient funding for the RAA resulting from a greater service demand than forecast/ closing of government grants for inter-agency placement or adoption support.
- Delays in establishing the RAA
- The RAA does not deliver all of the expected benefits.

### 7.2 To help mitigate these risks the project board meets regularly and ensures a learning culture by engaging with other emerging RAAs and DfE specialists. In addition, the project board ensures that there is:

- Good and ongoing engagement with staff and other stakeholders
- Governance structures ensure effective oversight of the RAA in terms of costs and outcomes
- Effective project management and ongoing dialogue with the DfE in respect of grant funding to establish the RAA.

**8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 A key priority of the RAA will be to ensure appropriate ethnicity and cultural matches between adopters and children; and by providing adoption support in which needs and equality issues are addressed to help prevent placement breakdowns.

**9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

| <b>Document</b>   | <b>Place of Inspection</b> | <b>Contact Officer</b>         |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Development of a Regional Adoption Agency Executive Board 24 March 2016 | Municipal Building, Widnes | Tracey Coffey<br>0151 511 6790 |