



COUNCILLOR TONY SMITH

**CABINET MEMBER FOR
CHILDREN AND FAMILY
SERVICES**

CABINET

Monday, 27 March 2017

MERSEY REGION ADOPTION AGENCY

Councillor Tony Smith, Cabinet Member - Children and Family Services, said:

“Finding the right, most appropriate and loving adoptive parents for a child is incredibly important. Wirral is lucky to have hundreds of foster carers and prospective adopters across the borough, all doing a fantastic job in supporting vulnerable children.

The proposals in this report help us go even further, and create a regional adoption agency – allowing access to a bigger pool of adopters, quicker and more efficient processes and, crucially, a much better chance of matching a child with the perfect adoptive family.”

REPORT SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide Cabinet with background information to the national drive towards the regionalisation of adoption services across England and describe the progress of the proposal to develop a Regional Adoption Agency across the four Merseyside local authority areas of Wirral, Sefton, Liverpool and Knowsley in line with Government expectations.

CONCLUSION

It is the expectation of central government that there will be a RAA in Merseyside and across England by 2020. This report proposes a model for the Merseyside RAA and sets out the benefits this will bring to children, adopters and to the local authorities involved.

RECOMMENDATION/S

Members of the Cabinet are recommended to:

1. Approve the continued development of the proposed model for the Knowsley, Wirral, Sefton and Liverpool Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) including the recommendation that local authority staff members are to be seconded into the RAA.
2. Note the intention for the new model to move into shadow arrangements during the second quarter of 2017, with the new model becoming operative in January 2018.
3. Approve the proposal to use the name AIM (Adoption in Merseyside) as the brand name for the RAA going forward
4. Receive a further report containing a detailed business case including financial, human resources and the results of formal consultation with staff and unions, governance and customer implications for final approval before the Regional Adoption Agency is implemented.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

1.1 Government expect there will be regional adoption agencies progressing across the country in 2017, with authorities unable to establish a RAA, being directed to join an existing collaboration. This report shows the proposed benefits and positive outcomes for Wirral and the other local authorities, children and adopters in the creation of a regional adoption agency. The Merseyside RAA is progressing in line with other neighbouring RAA's for example, Warrington, Wigan, St Helen's and Cheshire West & Chester Council's coming together as WWISH. The report also details both the vision for the service and the progress to date of the Merseyside RAA.

There are still some decisions for the development of the Merseyside RAA which require agreement across all four local authority areas which will be prioritised at the strategic board. At this point it is envisaged that the new model will move into shadow arrangements during the second quarter of 2017, with the new model becoming fully operational in January 2018.

1.2 The key aim of a RAA is to:

- Match children who have adoption as their plan with an adoptive family which meets their needs in a timely manner.
- Ensure all those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice they need to understand the adoption journey.
- Ensure families are well prepared, enabled and supported to care for children with plans for adoption.

The Merseyside RAA will focus on improving the child's journey through the adoption process and look to deliver high standards of practice across all four local authority areas, leading to better outcomes for the children and adopters. Wirral's children and adoptive families will benefit from having a focused service which does not have to manage the competing needs of other services to children and families within the local authority. These aims will be achieved through:

- The development of early placement finding processes which enable consistent planning and identification of children across the four local authorities, which currently can only be done on an individual local authority basis.
- The recruitment of sufficient numbers of well prepared and resilient potential adopters by offering improved support and training through sharing and pooling resources.
- The further development and increased use of early permanence options such as concurrency and Fostering to Adopt. This is a particular area which will be supported by Wirral being part of the RAA.
- The development of a regional approach to the commissioning of the right levels and type of support for adopters and children from the beginning to build a thriving family environment.

- The development of a national infrastructure for recruitment and matching which will complement the working practices of the RAA.
- An increase in the potential for efficiencies and increased focus on the needs of children by sharing business processes, optimising the use of existing staffing resource and minimising the duplication of tasks.
- The development of a powerful regional voice for adopters and children to enable their full engagement in the coproduction of emerging and improved services within the RAA.
- The RAA will hold a weekly Adoption Panel enabling more timely decision making regarding the suitability of potential adopters and the matching of children. Wirral's adoption panel currently meets every three weeks due to the demand, but can result in a delay in matching for some children.

1.3 Key objectives:

- To be an effective, innovative and high performing service.
- To be efficient in management and operational structures.
- To commission strategically to support the work of the RAA.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

2.1 The option of joining this Regional Adoption Agency rather than other authorities in Merseyside was due to the ability to build on existing shared services and staff relationships. There was also consideration of the geographical area to enable a large enough adoption footprint, without the distance travelled being too far for adopters and staff to access services and support.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3.1 In June 2015 the Department for Education (DfE) published a white paper which stated local authorities should be working towards the creation of Regional Agencies by 2020 (Regionalising Adoption - June 2015). The paper outlined an expectation that local authorities would begin to form firm proposals, alongside their voluntary partners, to shape and effectively align their Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). Their continuing commitment to this approach was demonstrated by the Education and Adoption Act 2016 which has also given power to the government to direct a local authority to enter into a RAA if it has not done so by 2017.

3.2 The Government vision behind the regionalisation of adoption services is to accelerate the pace of change to ensure those children, for whom adoption is the right path, are given the best chance of finding a loving family as quickly as possible. The DfE is providing start-up project funding to support local authorities to take forward their proposals.

- 3.3 The White Paper also described a number of areas of weakness where it felt that regionalisation of adoption services would improve outcomes for children and adopters.
- 3.4 The paper described a fragmented and confusing adoption landscape with around 180 agencies (local authority and voluntary agencies) recruiting and matching adopters for 5000 children per year. In the first three quarters of 2014-15, 20 local authorities/groups of local authorities recruited fewer than ten adopters and 58 recruited fewer than 20. Similarly, six voluntary adoption agencies recruited fewer than ten adopters and ten recruited fewer than 20.
- 3.5 Regionalising adoption services will reduce duplication of effort across neighbouring local authority areas and focus staffing and resources across a wider footprint leading to a more effective and efficient service where costs can be reviewed and potential efficiencies achieved. A system which is fragmented also reduces the scope for strategic planning across the wider permanence agenda, regional commissioning of adoption support services as well as specialisation, innovation and investment according to need.
- 3.6 Large numbers of small agencies working in isolation from each other render the system less able to make the most effective use of the national supply of actual and potential adopters and more vulnerable to peaks and troughs in the flow of children and to utilise the staffing levels effectively.
- 3.7 The national average of time taken between placement order and match in 2014-15 was eight months. This is longer than the national target and in an increase from seven months in 2013-14.
- 3.8 The national data also shows the system could be improved. Statistics show in September 2014, there were 3,470 children with a placement order waiting to be matched. 54% of these children had been waiting longer than 18 months. The above data shows the system is still not working well enough for these vulnerable children.
- 3.9 Sequential decision making and delays in matching are not only damaging to Children but also costly, requiring longer periods of support. It is vital children are given the best and earliest possible chance of finding a family, irrespective of authority boundaries. We know successful matching relies on being able to access a wide range of potential adopters from the beginning. Operating at a greater scale would allow social workers to do this thus reducing delay in the system.
- 3.10 There is also opportunity for practice innovation created by moving to a new regional up scaled delivery model which has real potential to improve matching and design best practice into the new agency.
- 3.11 Nationally, there are too few adopters willing and able to adopt harder to place children, including sibling groups, children with disabilities or additional needs, as well as older children.

Local authorities continue to recruit and assess adopters for children in their local authority in line with their statutory duties.

However, despite the rigorous selection processes, authorities are left with adopters who, for whatever reason, cannot be matched with many of the children waiting. Recruitment from a wider geographical base than an individual local authority that uses specialist techniques for recruiting adopters for hard to place children, would potentially lead to fewer children waiting.

- 3.12 In May 2015, the Adoption Support Fund was introduced to make therapeutic support easily accessible, timely and of high quality for families when they need it the most. Case studies and the recent report commissioned by central government written since the national rollout have shown the benefit of the fund both for families who have been in crisis but also families who have needed a bit of extra support at an earlier stage of their adoption journey. In 2016-17 it is likely that the service will draw down grant of £100,000 to support potential adoptive families
- 3.13 Currently adoption support services are largely commissioned and provided on a spot purchase basis and provided by a mix of in house local authority provision, the NHS and independent providers (voluntary adoption agencies, adoption support agencies, and small private providers). The latest letter from central government (January 2017) has identified a risk that the current financial envelope of the fund is insufficient to keep up with the growing demand year on year. It has therefore introduced a financial cap for individual cases and asked local authorities to consider match funding in the most complex of cases. It is also evident that the public and independent sectors are not able to grow sufficiently to meet increased demand for adoption support and provide parental choice between a range of providers. There are regional gaps in both the types and quality of services on offer and little evidence of spare capacity in the system.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The DfE have not been prescriptive about how the ongoing funding of the RAA's should be determined, other than that they need to be affordable and sustainable. It is intended that in Year One the Merseyside RAA will be cost neutral in terms of staffing and that in Years two and three the agency will look for areas where efficiencies can be created due to streamlining and innovation of services and reduction of duplication of effort across the four LA areas. These details and the future funding model however are yet to be agreed.
- 4.2 The Finance work stream, which Liverpool City Council is taking the lead, is reviewing the current staffing and admin structures and the resources which will be available to support the first year of the Merseyside RAA. In 2016-17 Wirral's Adoption Service has a budget for staffing of £614,400 (15 FTE) and other overheads / support costs of £265,800.
- 4.3 The strategic board is also is considering what additional short term, financial resources can be made available to support the transfer of staff into another building and to fund additional corporate and infrastructure costs for the agency as it moves into a regional service.
- 4.4 The RAA work is supported by a DfE grant of £500,000 to ensure the project is delivered within agreed timescales.

4.5 The Board have agreed that adoption allowances will be retained within the budgets of the local authority areas. Wirral currently pays adoption allowances in respect of 187 children with an indicative cost of £1.4million per annum.

5.0 LEGAL

5.1 The governance framework of the programme has been agreed by the RAA strategic board. The board is the overarching group where all key decisions are agreed and issues, risks, updates from work streams and possible delays are discussed. The board consists of senior representatives from all relevant local authority areas, Voluntary agencies and the DfE. There is also an Operational Programme board consisting of key operational staff.

5.2 Eight separate work streams have been identified and a work stream lead has been nominated for each group. The work streams have a representative from each local authority area and meet monthly. The work streams and their local authority lead are as follows:

Information Technology-Knowsley
Human Resources-Wirral
Commissioning and Performance-Knowsley
Finance-Liverpool
Estates-Liverpool
Communications-Liverpool
Legal-Liverpool
Operational Delivery-Knowsley
Learning and Development-Sefton

The outcome of this work is a proposal that the RAA is hosted by Liverpool City Council and that the governance, commissioning and performance management of the RAA is by Knowsley Council.

There has been full engagement at a senior officer level from each of the four local authorities during the development stage and from the commissioned voluntary adoption agencies. There is a consensus view that the above model is the best fit for the Merseyside RAA and this view is supported by the DfE.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

6.1 Staff from each local authority area adoption service will be seconded into the Merseyside RAA. Each local authority has reviewed their team structure and indicated which staff members may transfer to the RAA. All staff will second into the RAA on their current terms and conditions and will continue to be paid by their home authority. All front line staff members have attended a number of stakeholder events and have had the opportunity to air their concerns and questions with their own senior managers, RAA managers and their union representative. Formal consultation by the HR work stream representatives will begin with staff in April 2017. The HR work stream is also working on the secondment agreement.

6.2 The operational development work stream has produced a draft staffing structure of the Merseyside RAA which has been shared with all staff and senior managers within

the local authority areas. In the first year of the Merseyside RAA the staffing structure reflects the current staffing levels and roles that currently exist within the four local authority teams. It is expected, however, that in the first year of the Merseyside RAA there will be further consultation with staff and partners to look at reviewing the model of service based on an increased understanding of activity and need as a regional service which will be evaluated regularly by the Head of Service for the RAA who will be appointed in consultation with all four authorities, and the Strategic Board which will include Wirral's Deputy Director of Children's Social Care.

- 6.3 Agreement has been made as to the scope of the functions that will be delivered by the regional service. The service will be delivered as a Hub and Spoke model with a regional hub based in, New Hutte, Halewood. New Hutte is a community interest company, with a children's centre on site. It has been chosen as it meets the desired criteria as set by the strategic board. It is proposed that the "spokes" will exist to provide a flexible continued local presence in each of the four local authority areas to enable staff for example, to continue to work effectively with the other social work staff focused on work with the child.

Currently prospective adopters from Wirral either attend 3 day pre-approval training within Wirral or travel from Wirral to Sefton. It is proposed that going forward this training will be held centrally at the Hub in Halewood for all applicants' from each of the four local authorities and expenses will be paid as appropriate. It is not envisaged that this will disadvantage or deter applicants from Wirral, although this will be monitored through the strategic board.

- 6.4 The main functions that will be delivered by staff in the Merseyside RAA from the Hub base will be:

- Recruitment of adopters and central access point
- Marketing
- Adoption panel and administration of the panel. This will mean a reduction of current costs for room hire for Wirral Council
- Training and development of staff, Wirral staff will also be able to access training provided locally through the Council
- Pre and Post approval training (adopters), Wirral already share this training with Sefton Council and find this beneficial, also a reduction in room hire costs
- Management and supervision of staff
- Collection of data and management of performance, whilst feeding back to each of the individual authorities
- Tracking, linking and matching of children
- Adoption support (arranged centrally but delivered locally)
- Special Guardian support for Liverpool and Wirral (not financial support)

Activity continuing in the local authority areas:

- Continued relationships with social care teams
- Adoption support delivery
- Links with Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA) commissioned services
- Early identification and tracking
- Selection/ matching

- Family finding activity

Inter country Adoptions will continue to be a commissioned specialist service and step parent adoptions will remain within the local authority.

An Interim Merseyside RAA Head of Service was recruited in September 2016 and is currently working alongside the current Merseyside RAA Programme Manager and Project Support assistant.

7.0 POTENTIAL NAME FOR THE MERSEY REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY

- 7.1 Across the country regional adoption agencies are starting to name themselves to give them a sense of regional and organisational identity. Names have been kept simple and all include adoption as part of their name. At a staff stakeholder event in January 2017 a suggestion was made to senior managers that the new entity should be called AIM - Adoption in Merseyside. This suggestion was taken to the strategic board in February and is now being recommended to Members.

8.0 I.T ISSUES

- 8.1 There are a number of key issues that the IT work stream for the Programme is managing and which are ongoing. They are:

- Ensuring that the hub base is sufficiently networked and enabled to meet the demands of the Merseyside RAA.
- Ensuring that staff have access to new IT equipment that allows them to work agilely from a variety of settings and to ensure they have secure access to the network from sites outside of local authority buildings.
- To work with Liquid Logic to develop an integrated IT system that allows the RAA to be able to track and manage the regional adoption processes as well as ensure that they retain sufficient access to the systems they require in their local authority areas.
- To ensure that staff have sufficient training and support in the new IT system and equipment to enable them to work effectively once they move into the Merseyside RAA

9.0 PHYSICAL ASSETS

- 9.1 Each local authority team currently houses its own adoption team. The Estates work stream has identified the following criteria to support the selection of the hub site.

- A location that is accessible by car and public transport for staff, adopters and partners that takes into account the need for some staff who may be travelling a further distance than their own LA base.
- Space to house 35+ staff plus on a hot desking basis.
- Meeting room space and room to hold training and events for adopters.
- A customer facing area/ reception and a building that is able to be opened outside of usual working hours.
- Access to some parking on site.
- A building that houses other services/ partners that will complement and enhance the work of the Merseyside RAA.

9.2 A number of site options were under consideration and a decision on the site has been reached by the Strategic Board. Negotiations with the landlord of the building are underway to agree terms and final costs around accommodation.

10.0 RELEVANT RISKS

10.1 There are still some key decisions for the Merseyside RAA that are still be made across the four local authority councils. Most notably, finalisation of what financial and Human Resources will be going into the agency in Year 1. A central risk log has been developed for the programme and will be updated regularly and reported upon at the strategic board. The DfE are providing national seminars to support RAA's to work through the complexities of bringing together adoption teams and managing the transition from local to regional working.

10.2 The bringing together four separate adoption services into a single entity is complex and not without risk.

Much progress has been made but there are still some key decisions for the respective councils and the Merseyside RAA to make. They are:

- To agree terms and costs for the hub base.
- The finalisation of what financial and Human Resources will be put into the agency by each local authority area in Year 1.
- The nature of the secondment arrangements.
- The appointment of a permanent Head of Service.

10.3 To ensure that these risks are managed a central risk log has been developed for the board. The DfE are also providing national seminars and a Consultant acting as a coach to support RAA's to work through the complexities of bringing together adoption teams and managing the transition from local to regional working.

The Commissioning and Performance work stream will be focusing on developing a detailed service specification for the Merseyside RAA and a performance framework which will be crucial to be able to evaluate and hold to account the developing RAA in its first year and beyond.

11.0 ENGAGEMENT / CONSULTATION

11.1 The proposal for the Merseyside RAA was approved by the DfE in 2016. Planning meetings began with the creation of a Strategic Board for the project chaired by the Executive Director of Children's services for Knowsley Council and also included senior representatives from the four local authority areas and the commissioned Adoption voluntary agencies. Agreement was made at an early stage that Liverpool City Council should act as the host authority for the Merseyside RAA.

11.2 The board also agreed that consultants should be engaged to complete a scoping exercise of adoption services and performance, mapping of existing provision and carry out engagement activity across adopters and front line staff.

11.3 Price Waterhouse Cooper were engaged in September 2016 and completed a lengthy report in November which was presented to the board on the 10th November 2016 with

its baseline assessment of current services and activity and recommendations for a future operating model. The report has since been shared with all key stakeholders connected with the Merseyside Regional Adoption Agency. There has been significant progress since the report was produced, which now renders it to be out-dated and superseded by other considerations.

11.4 The operating model that Price Waterhouse Cooper had proposed, would have resulted in an increase in management structure and a decrease in frontline social work staff and did not reflect existing staffing structures within each local authority. This proposed operating model has been discounted by the strategic board and through consultation with the DfE Mentor, in favour for a model closer to existing staffing structures.

11.5 Trade unions are being consulted within the four authorities.

12.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

12.1 The proposed model will provide greater opportunities for children with diverse needs to be matched with adopters more promptly due there being access to wider resources.

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APPENDICES

REFERENCE MATERIAL

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date