

REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY (RAA) PROPOSAL

Cabinet Member(s)	Councillor David Simmonds CBE
Cabinet Portfolio(s)	Deputy Leader of the Council Education & Children's Services
Officer Contact(s)	Tony Zaman, Social Care
Papers with report	None

HEADLINES

Summary	This report sets out the background requirement for the London Borough of Hillingdon to join a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) and the recommendation that this is achieved by joining the Ambitious for Adoption RAA.
Putting our Residents First	This report supports the following Council objectives of: <i>Our People</i> .
Financial Cost	<p>The cost of joining the Ambitious for Adoption RAA will be £263,490, with an expected additional cost of £136,400 for external Inter Agency placements, at a total cost of £399,890. In total, this would fund 9 adoption placements.</p> <p>The Council base budget for adoption, including the Inter Agency fees is £459,622, which when compared to the Ambitious for Adoption total cost, would deliver a saving of £60k.</p>
Relevant Policy Overview Committee	Social Care, Housing and Public Health
Relevant Ward(s)	All

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet:

- 1) **Agree in principle for the Council to join the *Ambitious for Adoption* Regional Adoption Agency;**
- 2) **Delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Social Care, in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services, to make all necessary decisions to further progress this proposal and formally sign-up to *Ambitious for Adoption* on behalf of the Council.**

Reasons for recommendation

1. Officers consider that *Ambitious for Adoption* presents a coherent approach to improving the timeliness and quality of adoptions for children whilst maintaining staff located in Hillingdon, which improves the connection with the broader assessment processes and social care teams. This also enables the adoption staffing to be utilised for related work, such as special guardianship assessments, at times when there is lower demand; within the alternative model considered this is not possible.
2. Within this approach the Council is not required to pool its current costs related to adoption and instead contributes a zero based amount relative to its demand into a shared budget core and flexi model, which means that financial control is maintained over demand fluctuations. Staff from the hub in this approach are located in each borough, so each local authority maintains sovereignty over the care planning and assessments, leading to the decision for a child to be adopted in line with its corporate parenting responsibilities.
3. The recruitment and assessment of adopters, the matching process and the adoption support is undertaken through the RAA. As this is a more geographically disparate Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), the recruitment for adopters is from more diverse locations. This presents opportunities for improved matching and Coram will have access to its national pool of adopters to increase a match and timeliness.
4. Procurement supports the recommendation to join the *Ambitious for Adoption* RAA and will work with the Lead Partner (Harrow Council) and the Voluntary Adoption Agency (Coram), appointed through direct award, to review contractual documentation.

Alternative options considered / risk management

5. The Council has worked closely with Adopt London West in order to develop a viable business case which offers operational and financial assurance, whilst in parallel exploring the same with *Ambitious for Adoption*. The Adopt West London approach has not provided a sufficient level of detail or confidence to be considered.

Policy Overview Committee comments

6. None at this stage

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background and National Context

7. Following a range of national policy changes since 2012, including the 2015 Regionalising Adoption paper by the DfE (Department for Education) that sought improvements in adoption performance, the government announced in March 2016 changes to the delivery of adoption services by proposing that all local authorities adoption services be delivered on a regionalised basis by 2020.
8. The Government has reinforced their policy ambition through provisions in the Education and Adoption Act 2016. The Act also gives the Secretary of State a new power to direct one or more named local authorities to make arrangements for any or all of their adoption functions to be carried out on their behalf by the local authorities named, or by another agency.
9. The premise for this was to:
 - Increase the number of children adopted.
 - Reduce the length of time children wait to be adopted.
 - Improve post adoption support services to families who have adopted children from care.
 - Reduce the number of agencies that provide adoption services thereby improving efficiency & effectiveness.
10. Following the General Election (June 2017), the Minister of State for Children and Families and the DfE have reaffirmed a commitment to this policy. The DfE has shared five organisational requirements that should be in place in all RAAs:
 - A single line of authority with the ability to act as a single service and a head of service in place.
 - Transfer of staff into the organisation.
 - Inclusion of core adoption functions of recruitment and assessment of adopters, early permanence and family finding, and adoption support.
 - Funding from local authorities into the RAA.
 - Pan-regional approach to matching i.e. one pool of children and adopters.

Local Context and Case for Change

11. Following the publication of the DfE paper, Regionalising Adoption (June 2015), the Department invited local authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies to submit Expressions of Interest in becoming part of new regionalised arrangements.
12. London Councils hosted project resources funded via the DfE to develop the case for change that addressed London's requirements for a new model. The brand "Adopt London" was created.
13. At the heart of the proposition for Adopt London is that a pooled and dedicated service will deliver better outcomes through stronger leadership, more resilient services, pooled resources and a dedicated focus upon implementing the learning of what works best for

every adopted child and every adopter across the capital. The specific improvements that are intended relate to:

- Early Permanence Planning, including increased use of Foster for Adoption.
 - Children are placed more quickly.
 - Children with harder to place characteristics placed more quickly.
 - A pan-London pool of approved adopters for matching.
 - Improved marketing and recruitment.
 - Adopters receiving a more rapid and consistent service
 - Improved and more consistent post-Adoption support.
 - Efficiencies derived from operating at scale.
14. The initial focus was on a London wide RAA. However, in October 2016 an Outline Business Case was approved that set out a revised model that proposed 4 separate RAAs to be established with an option for a central hub to be developed for shared functions: North, South, East and West.
15. This model recommended that the contributions from each borough to fund the relevant RAA (and central coordination and the potential Hub) is based upon their current amount of spend upon their Adoption Service and hosting overheads for the host authority (Ealing). For Hillingdon it was a like for like budget contribution into a yet to be specified target operating model or financial profile realising benefits from taking the Adopt London West approach.
16. Recognising the lack of progress in defining both the operational and financial modelling, beyond the pooling of existing resources and following discussions with the Cabinet Member and Chief Executive, officers explored the potential of joining Ambitious for Adoption.
17. Ambitious for Adoption is the title for a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) in development with Coram, a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) approved as a Regional Adoption Agency, led by the London Borough of Harrow for and with the London boroughs of Redbridge, Bromley, City of London, Waltham Forest and Slough Children's Trust. The RAA delivery model is a Hub and Spokes, with co-location of services across the authorities delivered by a registered and outstanding Voluntary Adoption Agency (Coram) by direct award.
18. The Hub is to be integrated within the VAA offices from a central London location providing core services. The RAA provision will be headed up by a Service Lead for the RAA with oversight and contract accountability to the RAA Strategic Governance Board. The RAA Service Lead will take responsibility for the leadership and management of the RAA including:
- Sufficiency planning.
 - Inspection readiness and reporting.
 - Adoption Panel Management and Administration.
 - Contract supervision for fulfilment of sub-contracted/commissioned services (including peer support, inter-country adoption and birth family support).
 - Operational compliance and resilience including GDPR for children.
 - RAA contract compliances and all statutory requirements associated with adoption and fostering services.
 - Staff leadership, supervision and case management.

19. Supported by integrated VAA central provision for:
 - A robust Quality Management Framework.
 - Financial administration.
 - Employment and human resource management.
 - Information systems and data governance.
 - IT and technical support systems.
 - Recruitment and retention of qualified staff.
20. The Hub and Spokes delivery model will provide for services to be located in each partner agency to facilitate local links, relationships, continuity and locality delivery and ease of access to services.
21. There are a number of advantages to this approach:
 - Use of established systems, processes and joint working.
 - Immediacy of start-up of the RAA minimising risk.
 - Established cost benefit evidenced by VAA/LA operations of three of the agencies.
 - Existing registration as a Voluntary Adoption Agency and an Independent Fostering Agency.
 - Flexible and sustainable responses to demand and supply using blended contracted and Interagency Fee modelling.
 - Aligns to the needs of practice development and each LAs service improvement goals through additional expertise.
 - Access to potential new funding sources via charity status of the VAA where specific grants may be applied to assist in the delivery of benefits to children.
 - Minimises transition complexity of staffing, resources, technology.
 - Early permanence delivery and innovative practice informed by longitudinal research and evaluation activity.
 - Designation of the RAA transitional and ongoing leadership.
 - Independent challenge and custodianship in the interests of children.
22. The services delivered by the RAA, in accordance with statutory duties for adoption:
 - The recruitment, preparation and assessment for approval of prospective adopters.
 - Early Permanence for children who require adoptive placements (including preparation, training and support through the process).
 - Family finding for children and matching recommendations.
 - Continuum of adoption support services pre and post placement and domiciliary services.
 - Letter box contacts for adopted children with birth families.
 - Adoption and Matching Panel Management and oversight.
 - International Adoptions (by sub contract from the RAA) 7.
23. Officers consider that Ambitious for Adoption presents a coherent approach to improving the timeliness and quality of adoptions for children whilst maintaining staff located in Hillingdon which improves the connection with the broader assessment processes and social care teams.
24. Within this approach the Council is not required to pool its current costs related to adoption and instead contributes a zero based amount relative to its demand into a shared budget core and flexi model, which means that financial control is maintained over demand

fluctuations. Staff from the hub in this approach are located in each borough, so each local authority maintains sovereignty over the care planning and assessments leading to the decision for a child to be adopted in line with its corporate parenting responsibilities.

25. The recruitment and assessment of adopters, the matching process and the adoption support is undertaken through the RAA. As this is a more geographically disparate RAA the recruitment for adopters is from more diverse locations, presenting opportunities for improved matching and Coram will have access to its national pool of adopters to increase a match and timeliness.
26. Coram are currently developing an RAA with Harrow, Redbridge, Bromley, The City of London and Slough. Following a meeting with representatives from Coram in December 2018, a costed proposal was provided at the beginning of January 2019, based on providing Hillingdon with 9 adoption placements. The following table sets out the proposed cost:

Coram Proposal (9 Placements)

	Amount £	Direct £	Overheads £	Inter Agency £
Salaries	204,439	204,439		
Training and other employee expenses	4,118	4,118		
Panel running costs	5,833	5,833		
Subscriptions	14,033	14,033		
Legal, marketing and other running costs	11,113	11,113		
Central services recovery (10%)	23,954		23,954	
Inter-agency fees				136,400
Total	263,490	239,536	23,954	136,400

27. This proposal will secure 5 placements from the RAA at a cost of £263,490, with the remaining 4 being purchased through the Inter Agency route at a cost of £136,400; the latter being retained by the Council, where costs will only be incurred should Hillingdon require more than 5 placements. If additional placements are required above 9, then the additional cost would need to be met by the Council. This proposal effectively mirrors the current Hillingdon delivery model.
28. As the Council are not proposing to transfer any staffing resources into the RAA, this makes it easier for Coram to work with, as it avoids the complicated issue of Local Government Pensions and allows Coram to offer a lower cost per FTE, as they contribute 6% towards their Pension offer.

Financial Implications

29. Hillingdon operates a combined Fostering and Adoption Service, which has an establishment of 26.0 fte staff, of these, 8.0 fte are currently vacant. As the service has a high number of vacant posts, it has been agreed that the vacant post equivalent will be transferred to the RAA, thus avoiding any complications due to TUPE or potential redundancy.

30. The current budget for The Adoption Service is £359,622, which provides for staffing costs and a number of subscriptions. The base budget also includes £100,000 for the purchase of adopters, where the Council has to pay an Inter Agency adoption fee. It should be noted that the base budget does not include an income target for the sale of Hillingdon adopters. The latest data indicates that Hillingdon successfully places between 6 to 9 children with suitable adopters in a year and currently has 4 adopters in the pipeline, and 17 children waiting for a placement.

The following table compares the proposal submitted by Coram with the Council's base budget:

Comparison with Coram Proposal

	Amount £	Direct £	Overheads £	Inter Agency £
Coram Proposal	263,490	239,536	23,954	136,400
LBH Budget	359,622	359,622	-	100,000
Variance	(96,132)	(120,086)	23,954	36,400

31. Coram's proposals compares very favourably with Hillingdon's available resources, in fact based on the 9 placement proposal, a saving of £96k can be achieved in the direct costs, with an expectation that an additional budget of £36k would be required to fund Inter Agency fee placements, resulting in a net saving of £60k. This also protects the Inter Agency budget, as this will still be in Hillingdon's control and would be managed as part of the Demographic contingency budget for Children's Services placements.
32. In summary, Coram's proposal will allow the Council to deliver a saving of £60k in 2019/20. This compares favourably with the West London Adoption proposal, which would require the Council to contribute an additional £33k above the base budget in the first year of operation.
33. Hillingdon is in a relatively strong position as the intention will be to transfer vacant posts, not staff and has already dealt with the issue of having an income target for the sale of adopters, which was taken out as part of the 2018/19 MTFB Budget development. As part of this process a budget of £100k was created for inter-agency adoption purchases, where the responsibility will still sit with the Council.

RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities?

34. This proposal will improve the timeliness of children achieving stability and permanence.
35. Adoption provides life-long family connections for children with parents who are fully committed to them. Adoption legally secures children within their new families.

36. Available evidence on outcomes suggests that adopted children do considerably better in a range of indicators than children who remain in long term foster care or in residential care. These indicators include forming relationships with their adoptive families and friends; intellectual development; social adjustment; and securing and maintaining employment in adulthood. With time, adoption can help to overcome behavioural problems caused by disruptions in the birth family or in previous placements.

Consultation carried out or required

None at this time.

CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate Finance

Corporate Finance has reviewed the report and notes the budgetary implications set out above. The funding of the proposal to use *Ambitious for Adoption* will be from the current 2018/19 Adoption budget of £459,622, including Inter agency fees of £100k, which is expected to generate a saving. Any saving arising from the new service will be utilised to mitigate other financial pressures within Children's Services.

There are no issues arising from TUPE implications as the proposal is funded from the resources in the 2018/19 approved Revenue Budget for currently vacant posts which means there is no need to transfer any staff to deliver the new service.

Legal

The Borough Solicitor confirms that, by joining *Ambitious for Adoption*, the Council will comply with its obligation under section 3ZA of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (as amended by the Education and Adoption Act 2016) to enter into joint arrangements for the provision of adoption services.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL