
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

4 February 2019

Name of Cabinet Member:

Children's Services: Cllr Pat Seaman

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Deputy Chief Executive (People)

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

Expansion of the Regional Adoption Agency

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

Cabinet endorsed Coventry becoming part of a Regional Adoption Agency on 31 October 2017. This was a government requirement that was published by the DfE in Adoption A vision for change in March 2016. The Regional Adoption Agency is a shared services model which includes Coventry City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Council, Warwickshire County Council and Worcestershire County Council. The host authority is Warwickshire County Council. The Regional Adoption Agency is called Adoption Central England (ACE).

Herefordshire County Council has now applied to join ACE. Before this can happen all four local authorities need to agree to the expansion through its own relevant political processes.

Recommendations:

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People is requested to:

- 1) Endorse the expansion of ACE to include Herefordshire County Council and delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services to sign on behalf of the City Council Council.

List of Appendices included:

None

Background papers:

None

Other useful documents

The decision to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency was made by Cabinet on 31 October 2017. The background papers are:
<http://internaldemocraticservices.coventry.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=124&MID=11477#A123584>.

The requirement for all local authorities to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency by 2020 is made in Adoption A vision for change published by the government in March 2016:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/512826/Adoption_Policy_Paper_30_March_2016.pdf

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

The progress of the Regional Adoption Agency was reviewed by the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) on 21 June 2018. It is scheduled for a further review in June 2019.

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

The Regional Adoption Agency is to be discussed by the Corporate Parenting Board on 24 January 2019.

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Expansion of the Regional Adoption Agency

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 It is the duty of every local authority to establish and maintain within their area a service designed to meet the needs in relation to adoption i.e. an adoption service. In response, Coventry City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Council, Warwickshire County Council and Worcestershire County Council linked to work towards the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency that has been named Adoption Central England (ACE). The service model was approved by the Cabinets of the four councils between October/November 2017 and the regional service became operational on 1 February 2018. The strategic direction for the service and monitoring functions are met through the ACE Executive Board on which representatives from all the local authority partner agencies and key stakeholders sit including from the voluntary adoption sector. The Executive Herefordshire County Council is presently not part of a Regional Adoption Agency. It has made an application to join ACE because of its close affinity to the local authorities already in ACE in terms of geography and aspiration for children who are to be adopted.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1 There are two options to consider: either the application is accepted or rejected
- 2.2 If the proposal is accepted it will bring the following benefits:
- An increase in the adopter pool. This will allow better matching to meet each child's needs and a wider geographical region if children need to be placed away from the local area
 - Allow good practice to be better shared across the region
 - Bring efficiencies of scale which will provide better value in Coventry's adoption service
 - Allow ACE to be more sustainable in the future
 - Gives ACE a better profile both regionally and nationally.
- 2.3 The adoption performance in Herefordshire County Council was judged by Ofsted as good in the last Single Inspection Framework. It has good statistical performance which is likely to enhance the performance of ACE. It is also noted that the size of Herefordshire and its adoption work will make up less than 10% of ACE overall. Therefore, agreement for it to join will only have a marginal impact on ACE.
- 2,4 If the proposal is rejected the current status quo remains.
- 2.5 It is recommended that the proposal to expand ACE, along with the benefits it brings, is agreed.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1 Consultation regarding Herefordshire County Council joining ACE has been on-going. Each individual local authority has fully considered the proposal. The application has been extremely scrutinised by the ACE Executive Board. This includes representatives from voluntary adoption agency colleagues. ACE also has a Stakeholder Group which consists of adopters and practitioner across the area. Therefore, there has been opportunity for a variety of consultation to inform decision making.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1 If endorsed, a project group will be set up to oversee the introduction of Herefordshire County Council into ACE. This will consist a number of work streams including HR, IT and Finance. The progress towards full integration will take place and be signed off by the Executive Board. Herefordshire County Council will only be allowed to fully join once all the current members are satisfied with the progress made. A target date for full integration is anticipated as 1 July 2019 but will only commence once all local authorities are content to proceed.

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Corporate Services

5.1 Financial implications

- 5.1 The ACE Executive Board has been clear that this expansion will not have an adverse financial impact on any of the existing partners and in fact the addition of a fifth partner may increase the potential for economies of scale.
- 5.2 Herefordshire will calculate their existing spend on in-scope adoption services on the same basis that the existing parties to the Host Agreement used, and this information will be used to calculate an average unit cost (£ per adoption). If Herefordshire's unit cost is the same or more than the ACE average unit cost then this will be Herefordshire's contribution for 2019/20 (pro-rated if they join part way through 2019/20). If Herefordshire's unit cost is less than the ACE average unit cost then the ACE Manager will need to consider with the Board and with Herefordshire closing the gap to ensure the financial stability and expected service performance of ACE is maintained.
- 5.3 There is an implementation grant of £60k available from the DfE to support any initial one-off costs of Herefordshire joining ACE.

5.2 Legal implications

- 5.2.1 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 is the principal piece of legislation governing adoption and it includes the duty on local authorities to maintain an adoption service in their area.
- 5.2.2 The Children and Families Act 2014 allows for the Secretary of State by order to require all local authorities in England to make arrangements for some specified functions to be carried out on their behalf by one or more other adoption agencies.
- 5.2.3 These functions include the recruitment of persons as prospective adopters, the assessment of prospective adopter's suitability to adopt a child and the approval of prospective adopters as suitable to adopt a child.
- 5.2.4 Further, the Education and Adoption Act 2016 enables the Secretary of State to require local authorities to make arrangements for their adoption functions to be carried out by a Regional Adoption Agency.
- 5.2.5 Coventry City Council entered into Partnership Agreement on 31 January 2018 and the agreement allows for new local authorities and sets out the process for doing. So long as all partners consent is given and Herefordshire join as a party to the agreement and comply with all the obligations of the Partnership Agreement.

5.2.6 Herefordshire will join once a Deed of Variation to the Partnership Agreement is completed by all parties and Herefordshire.

6. Other implications

6.1 How will this contribute to the Council Plan?

The expansion of ACE links specifically into the following areas of the Council Plan:

- Globally connected: this will improve the adoption infrastructure across the region. It will allow Coventry to be part of a wider collective of adoption services that will better promote the outcomes for our children who need to be adopted. In addition, it will give the city the chance to influence adoption practice across the region and even nationally.
- Locally connected: These arrangements will contribute to keeping children who are adopted safe and promote better outcomes. It will mean that children will have a better start in life with families who are better matched to meet their needs on a long term basis.
- Delivering our priorities: These arrangements will allow Coventry to capitalise on economies of scale. It can reduce costs such as management through rationalisation and reducing duplication. For example there is now a single adopter recruitment strategy across ACE and the four local authorities. This means, in addition, a wider pool of adopters will mean that schemes such as a peer led mentor programme is more feasible. This will contribute to local communities being able to support themselves. Finally it contributes to Coventry's desire to work with regional partners and deliver a high quality, cost effective adoption service.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

The risks to ACE with this proposal are as follows:

Risk	Mitigation	Risk Management
ACE becomes too large, over a wider geographical area and loses its unique identity.	Herefordshire has a previous identity and experience of collaborative working with Worcestershire. Herefordshire would be the second smallest adoption service within ACE having relatively low numbers of children looked after and adopted children as a consequence.	The strengthening of operational arrangements in the southwest of the region. Herefordshire fully accepts the ACE model and can easily assimilate into the ACE way of working.
ACE is still within the first 12 months of operations and a new joiner will impact up the progress made to date.	ACE has established itself well within its first 9 months and has sound processes in place and well-founded governance process.	ACE is continually reviewing the way it works in order to ensure that the key outcomes are met –if Herefordshire joins now this will allow opportunities to re-examine ways of working and extend services.
Change can create a dip in performance.	The regionalisation of adoption services is showing evidence of improved performance and the	Herefordshire will be joining ACE as a high performing adoption service with

	relationship between ACE and the local authorities is well established.	practices that are very aligned with those of ACE. Coventry has a close working relationship with ACE which will allow close monitoring of outcomes for Coventry children.
Insufficient adopters to meet the needs of children requiring placement.	The pool of children from Herefordshire requiring placement is manageable and Herefordshire will provide families for existing ACE children.	The Adopter Recruitment Sufficiency Strategy will be reviewed to explore the potential to extend recruitment within Herefordshire and their neighbouring authorities.
Costs associated with change – including IT, legal etc.	The DfE have confirmed that transitional funding will be available and Herefordshire have agreed that this will be allocated between them and ACE.	A detailed and costed transitional plan will be produced for approval by the ACE Executive Board on 14 January 2019.
Staffing loss.	Herefordshire has a small committed staff group of adoption practitioners who are aware that regionalisation is necessary. They have established relationships with staff in the ex-Worcestershire teams and are used to working together.	Herefordshire have a named HR lead and will work with ACE and their staff group in transitioning to the service. Staff are currently seconded into ACE and this will also apply to Herefordshire staff.
Financial risk to the existing ACE local authorities.	The ACE Executive Board is clear that there is to be no financial cost to them and some costs will in future be shared between five as opposed to four local authorities.	The transitional funding will support one off costs arising from the expansion proposal and a detailed financial analysis is to be received by the Board in January 2019.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

There is no direct impact on the Council as Warwickshire County Council is the host authority. Therefore, Warwickshire will carry the impact of any potential risk.

6.4 Equalities / EIA

An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed. At the present time any impact is purely positive. It will extend placement opportunities for children. Further it will strengthen the presence of ACE in the south west of the region easing access for prospective and approved adopters.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

All partner agencies have been consulted where appropriate and all are in favour of the expansion of ACE to include Herefordshire County Council.

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