From:	Peter Oakford, Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services
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To:	Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee – 6 September 2016
Subject:	**REPORT ON THE REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY**
Classification:	Unrestricted
Past Pathway of Paper:	None
Future Pathway of Paper:	None
Electoral Division:	All

Summary: This report provides the Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee with the outline of a proposal to develop a Regional Adoption Agency in line with Government expectations for adoption services:

The aim is to achieve further progress in our adoption services by:
- Improving the timeliness of the matching processes between children and adoptive parents
- Developing the adopter recruitment and adoption support through sharing and pooling resources with other local authorities.
- Increasing the potential for efficiencies, sharing business processes and the reduction in the duplication of tasks.
- This proposal supports one of the Council's strategic outcomes – 'Children and Young People in Kent get the best start in life'.

Recommendation: The Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee is asked to **CONSIDER** and **COMMENT ON** the content of the report and **ENDORSE** in principle the proposal to enter into formal dialogue with Medway Council and the London Borough of Bexley with a view to establishing a Regional Adoption Agency

1.   Introduction

1.1   In June 2015 the Department for Education (DfE) reported that local authorities should be working towards the creation of Regional Agencies by 2020.   There is an expectation that local authorities will begin planning, developing and working with partners to shape their Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).   Their commitment to this approach is such that the Education and Adoption Act 2016 has given power to the government to direct a local authority to enter into a RAA if it has not done so by 2017.

1.2   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, forever family as quickly as possible.   The DfE is providing start-up funding to support early local authorities to take forward their proposals. The paper which outlined this initiative described several inefficiencies.

a) Fragmentation

The current system is fragmented with around 180 agencies recruiting and matching adopters for only 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.

A RAA will be more effective and efficient in its operation meaning costs can be reviewed and potential efficiencies achieved.   A system that is fragmented reduces the scope for broader, strategic planning, as well as specialisation, innovation and investment.

Large numbers of small agencies renders the system unable to make the best use of the national supply of potential adopters, more vulnerable to peaks and troughs in the flow of children, and is less cost effective.

b) Matching

Whilst the introduction of Activity Days is a real success story, and despite improvements in child timeliness overall, it still takes an average of eight months between placement order and match.   This is too long, and more worryingly a national increase from seven months in 2013-14.

The national data also shows that the system could be improved.   As at 30 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.

Sequential decision making and delays in matching are not only damaging to children, but also costly.   Children are almost always in foster care whilst they wait for adoption.   The cost of a week of local authority foster care has been estimated at around £700 (including on-costs, Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Review, fostering social worker and child social worker).   This cost is more when there is an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placement. Research into the inter-agency fee found that the cost to the local authority of looking after a child who is never found a placement is at least £400,000.

It is vital that children are given the best and earliest possible chance of finding a family, irrespective of authority boundaries and lack of trust of other agencies' adopters.

We know that 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. It could also reduce the number of children who have their adoption decisions reversed. Furthermore, the opportunity for practice innovation created by moving to a new delivery model also has real potential to improve matching.

c) Recruitment

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 process we are left with adopters who, for whatever reason, cannot be matched with the children waiting.

Recruitment from a wider geographical base than an individual local authority, that takes account of the needs of children across a number of those local authorities in a regional recruitment strategy and uses specialist techniques for recruiting adopters for hard to place children, would potentially lead to fewer children waiting.

d) Adoption Support

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 from both the prototype phase and since national rollout have shown the benefit of the fund for families that have been in crisis, but also families that have needed a bit of extra support.

Currently, adoption support services are provided by a mix of local authority provision, the NHS, and independent providers (voluntary adoption agencies, adoption support agencies, and small private providers). A recent report identified a risk that, in its current form, both the public and independent sectors are unlikely to be able to grow sufficiently to meet increased demand for adoption support, let alone provide parental choice between a range of providers. There are regional gaps, gaps in the types of services on offer, and little evidence of spare capacity.

2.   Aims and objectives of a Regional Adoption Agency

2.1   The key aims of a RAA are to:

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

2.2 The RAA would be developed so that the focus is on the child's journey through the adoption process, looking to deliver high standards of practice which will lead to better outcomes for the child.

2.3 Key objectives are:-
- Early identification of children for whom adoption is the right option
- Timely placement of all children including sibling groups and older children
- Placements which are sustainable with the right support as needed
- A sufficient range and number of adopters able to parent children with a wide range of profiles and needs, enabling more children to be placed "in house"
- Making available a range of different adoption placement types, including early placement approaches such as Foster to Adopt
- To have an effective and well performing service which would be reflected in the adoption scorecard

3. Benefits of a Regional Adoption Agency

3.1 We anticipate that, following the formation of the RAA, the following benefits will be achieved:-

- Timeliness of adoption matching with central tracking of children and adopters
- Economies of scales for commissioned contracts; one lead commissioner to manage all adoption contracts on behalf of the RAA
- Reduction in bureaucratic processes so they are not replicated three times, in each local authority. Centralised management and administration of adoption panels, including health; this is subject to proposed changes in legislation in respect of adoption panels and whether they are necessary
- Increased government funding for the delivery of centralised adoption agencies
- Recruitment will be driven by the needs of a larger cohort of children who are waiting to be matched. Family finding social workers will be clearer about the adopters who are available and the children requiring placement
- Social workers will have immediate access to a larger pool of adopters when carrying out the matching process. This is likely to speed up the matching and maintain adopted children in their regional areas
- There will be opportunities to work in partnership with health departments across the region, which supports continuing and local health provision. There is increased choice, consistency and availability of support services in relation to post adoption support
- The RAA would look to develop supervision models, looking at cross-agency support, and to develop practice skills and behaviours, learning from good practice across the region. This will also enable external challenge and scrutiny over permanence decision making, timeliness and missed matches, etc
- Mechanisms will be established which will provide an overview of those children coming into the care system and this will provide an opportunity

to develop early planning with protocols agreed across a wider range of local authorities

4. Partners

4.1 As members of the South East Adoption Consortium, Kent County Council, Medway Council and the London Borough of Bexley already share information about children needing adoption and adopters waiting for children. In addition preparation groups for adoption applicants are also shared.

4.2 With this strong relationship already established, the Council has been in dialogue with these local authorities regarding the formation of a RAA. The DfE is interested in models that could deal with 200 children per year. With Kent County Council, the London Borough of Bexley and Medway Council working together this will be achieved. It is a requirement for all RAAs that they involve a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) partner. Whilst this will be a decision for the authorities collectively, Coram will be an obvious consideration given their long standing and successful partnership with the Adoption Service in Kent.

5. Performance

5.1 Comparative scorecard data for Adoption Services in Kent, Medway, and Bexley is detailed below.

Table 1

A1 - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (days)					
	Latest published 3 year average data 2012-15	Rank (total 151)	Statistical Neighbours	Latest published data: Q1 and Q2 2015-16	
Kent	**616**	**89**	**607**	**520**	
Medway	**715**	**135**	**602**	**544**	Target is 426
Bexley	**672**	**122**	**616**	**396**	
ENGLAND	**593**			**551**	

Table 2

A2 - Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days)					
	Latest published 3 year average data 2012-15	Rank (total 151)	Statistical Neighbours	Latest published data: Q1 and Q2 2015-16	
Kent	**221**	**77**	**236**	**233**	
Medway	**259**	**113**	**214**	**252**	Target is 121
Bexley	**270**	**121**	**219**	**187**	
ENGLAND	**223**			**251**	

Table 3

A3 - Children who wait less than 16 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (%)			
	Latest published 3 year average data 2012-15	Statistical Neighbours	Latest published data: Q1 and Q2 2015-16
Kent	43%	47%	69%
Medway	40%	46%	67%
Bexley	50%	46%	89%
ENGLAND	47%		59%

Table 4

	Number of approved adoptive families as at 31 March 2015	Number of applications to become an adoptive family still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) as at 31 March 2015
Kent	75	65
Medway	10	10
Bexley	24	18

Table 5

	Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2014-15 who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child	Adoptions from care (number adopted) 2012-15	Adoptions from care (% leaving care who are adopted) 2012-15
Kent	50%	430	17%
Medway	39%	115	20%
Bexley	Not available	70	14%
ENGLAND	63%	14,390	16%

Table 6

	Number of new Agency Decision Maker decisions (2014)	Number of new Agency Decision Maker decisions (2015)	% change 2014 to 2015	Number of new Agency Decision Maker decisions (2016)	% change 2015 to 2016
Kent	175	90	-47	113	+26%
Medway	40	30	-20		
Bexley	30	20	-29		
ENGLAND	6,170	4,310	-30	Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) data shows continuing decline	

Table 7

	Number of new Placement Orders granted (2014)	Number of new Placement Orders granted (2015)	% change 2014 to 2015	Number of new Placement Orders granted (2016)	% change 2015 to 2016
Kent	**165**	**80**	**-52**	**91**	**+14%**
Medway	**40**	**20**	**-50**		
Bexley	**25**	**25**	**4**		
ENGLAND	**5,420**	**3,590**	**-34**	ALB data shows continuing decline	

Table 8

	% of children for whom permanence decisions has changed away from adoption 2012-15"	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption (as at 31 March 2015)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2015)	Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. Where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days)2012-15
Kent	**18%**	**60**	**40**	**503**
Medway	**14%**	**30**	**10**	**508**
Bexley	**16%**	**10**	**10**	**495**
ENGLAND	**14**	**4,600**	**3,060**	**490**

5.   Scope of the Regional Adoption Agency

5.1   The scope of the RAA has been discussed across the three local authorities. There are clear areas where regionalisation can be progressed for many of the adoption pathways and administrative processes. There are also areas within each local authority which can be considered for regionalisation but which are more complex. Those areas in the authorities where there are separate contracting arrangements will need commissioning oversight, changes to contracts will be dependent on individual local authorities' arrangements and service requirements being appropriate for a regional approach.

5.2   All three local authorities recognise the challenges of moving to a regional structure; however all are committed to ensuring that all the business processes, including commissioned contracts, can be centralised through the RAA. Those areas which are more of a challenge can be timetabled to ensure that the complexity is addressed.

6.   Adoption Processes and Scope

6.1   In order to ensure there is timely permanency planning for all children entering care, permanency planning meetings (PPMs) are held. This supports early

identification of the children for whom adoption is the plan. It is the interface between adoption teams and the childcare teams that manage the entry of children into care and their early care planning for adoption. It was considered that the initial PPMs are best carried out within each local authority area to continue with the early identification of children in district teams, linking with the adoption service where children have a care plan that is likely to be adoption.

6.2 There was very good practice identified with some PPMs and notifications to the adoption team prior to entry into care and tracking of all children entering care. The timescales for notification to the adoption service varied across the three authorities and the consensus was that early identification would provide increased timeliness and children were transitioning from care to adoption with good preparation - life story work and later life letters. This led to very early linking with adopters, and in some cases this began at the initiation of proceedings. This also supports an increase of fostering to adopt placements.

7. Tracking and Matching

7.1 The early tracking of children which was in place in one local authority was considered to be an area where good practice could be shared across the three authorities and they would all work to have the same tracking systems, this would be part of the RAA and a centralisation of this process could be achieved as it is already in place, although it requires some streamlining.

7.2 There would also be a central tracking of all adopters who were assessed and waiting for a match; and for all adopters who are in stages 1 and 2. The recruitment and assessment of adopters would be shared across the three areas, including shared resources for the information evenings; adoption preparation training; mentoring and support groups. The approval process could also be shared, with centralisation of an adoption panel and its administration. This would require one central list of panel members, and consideration of the need to have dedicated RAA medical advisors for children for whom adoption is the plan. These are agreed objectives with the three authorities.

7.3 Across the three local authorities, the creation of a central database of adopters would support timely family finding; the central adopters list would be twinned with a central list of all children for whom adoption is the plan. RAA adoption family finding meetings that would review all children who required a match and the available adopters would be considered. The IT database used by each local authority for recording children and adopters would be available for the recruitment and assessment of social workers as well as for family finding social workers. All children (where adoption is the plan) would be allocated an adoption family finding social worker.

8. Post Adoption

8.1 The service in Kent is advanced with a contract in place with Coram who are linked with the Tavistock Clinic for psychology services. The Kent post adoption model is one where a multi-disciplinary team of professionals support those families with children experiencing challenges in their adoptive placement.

8.2　The service is able to provide services to families who meet the eligibility criteria. This requires assessment with a post adoption social worker. The money to finance the service is claimed through the Adoption Support Fund.

8.3　This model has also been expanded to support Post Special Guardianship Services and could be expanded to service all three local authorities; this would require the service to be re-commissioned, and the terms of the contract provided would need to be agreed by the three authorities. This would require Coram to tender for the extension of the contract; consideration could also be given to this being extended for post Special Guardianship Order (SGO) intervention.

9.　Inter-country adoptions

9.1　The three local authorities currently commission individually with inter-country adoption agencies. This could be a centrally-commissioned service with the ratio of previous usage being an indicator of the funding contribution from the authorities.

10.　Connecting Adoptive Families Independent Services (CAFIS) (Barnardo's) Overview of service model

10.1　The Independent Adoption & SGO Support Services are available across the whole of the geographical area covered by Kent County Council; the total contract cost for 2016-18 is £752,550. All local authorities are expected to offer these services and ensure they are delivered according to a comprehensive legislative framework. The individual elements of the service are:-

- An independent support service to birth parents - To provide a support and counselling service to birth parents prior to an adoption taking place, where a child is (or children are) looked after by Kent County Council and for whom adoption has been identified as the plan
- A service that provides access to birth records and intermediary services for adult adoptees - To assist adopted persons who have either been adopted through Kent County Council or who are resident in Kent, and who are aged 18 and over, to obtain information in relation to their adoption, and to facilitate contact between such persons and their adult birth relatives
- Access to Information and an Intermediary service for birth relatives and those with a prescribed relationship - To provide advice and support to birth relatives and those with a prescribed relationship aged 18 and over, who require intermediary services and access to non-identifying information when the adoptee has reached age 18 or over
- Contact services (direct contact and letterbox contact) - To provide a direct and indirect contact service for children under the age of 18 who have been adopted or who are the subject of a SGO and who have agreed contact with their birth relatives
- Kent County Council has a significant contract covering the CAFIS service; this is for consideration as part of the RAA but will need careful review, given its current budget and the throughput of work that is carried out by Barnardo's on behalf of Kent.

11. Legal Issues and Risks

11.1 There are likely to be a number of legal issues and risks regarding contracts, procurement and transfer of functions into the RAA. This also may include consideration of pension arrangements and a formal partnership agreement between all the local authorities involved in this project. These will need to be considered at an early stage but much will be dependent upon the final delivery model chosen.

11.2 Key risks and issues will be identified as part of the project planning. A risk register will be produced and will be regularly monitored and updated as part of the work plan of the project board.

12. Commissioning/Procurement Issues and Risks

12.1 Whatever arrangement is put in place will need to follow the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. This ensures that appropriate supply chain and contractual relationships are in place to meet and manage any sustainability issues, generate innovation and the development of partnerships.

12.2 Much will depend on the commercial model chosen. A clear understanding of risks identified within a risk register will pinpoint robust mitigations and reduce risk to the local authorities and the providers, and will enable all parties to understand where risks need to be shared.

13. RAA Governance

13.1 There is already a Partnership Board in operation looking at effective cross-partnership oversight and the future strategic direction of the Council's adoption services. It is proposed that this would be converted into a Regional Adoption Agency Project Board with the membership extended to all regional partners involved in the development of the RAA.
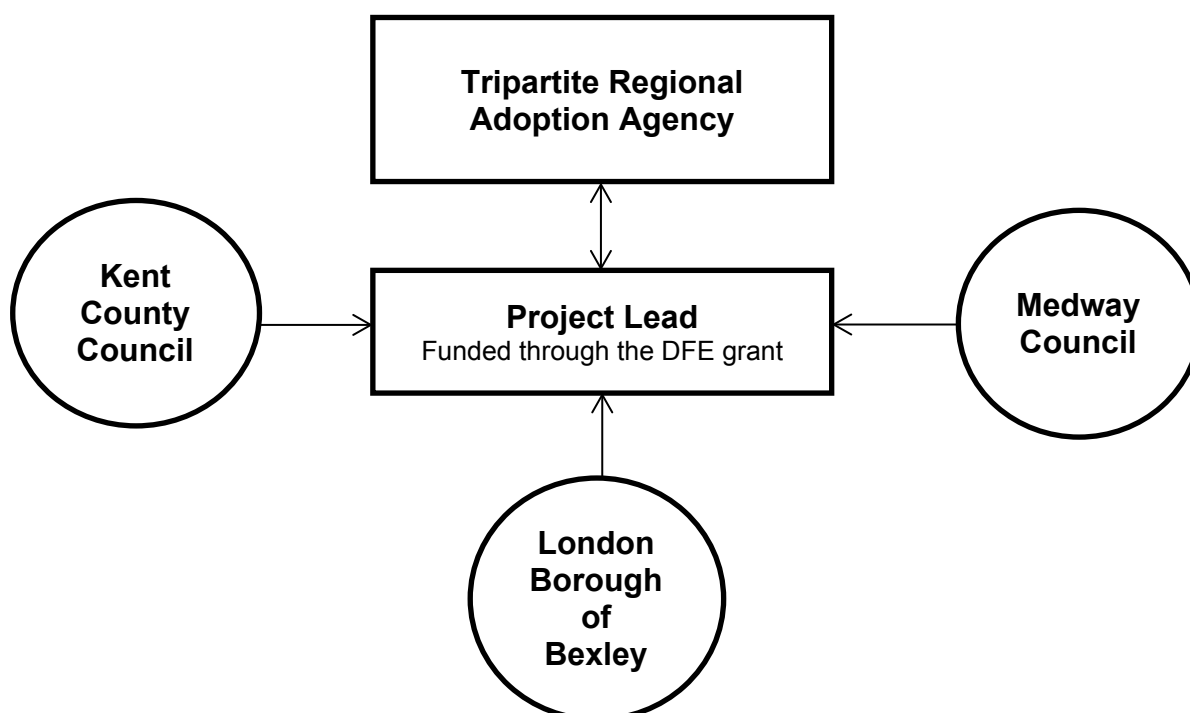
13.2 Each partner will be responsible for their own line management and governance responsibilities. Any issues will be discussed at the RAA Project Board as outlined above.

14. Equality Implications

14. There are no equality implications associated with this report.

15. Financial Implications

15.1 A submission will be made to the DfE for funding to support the project management of the delivery of the RAA.

16. Next Steps

16.1 All local authorities to ensure in principle agreements are in place from their respective corporate boards and Member led committees to deliver a RAA for Kent County Council, the London Borough of Bexley and Medway Council.

16.2 Submission to DFE for funding to support the project management of the delivery of the RAA.

16.3 Setting up a formal RAA Project Board and agreeing membership.

16.4 Continue with the discussions in order to centralise the services as far as possible without funding, including sharing of good practice, tracking adopter availability and sharing child level data.

17. Recommendations

17.1 Recommendation: The Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee is asked to **CONSIDER** and **COMMENT ON** the content of the report and **ENDORSE** in principle the proposal to enter into formal dialogue with Medway Council and the London Borough of Bexley with a view to establishing a Regional Adoption Agency

18. Background documents

18.1 Department for Education – Regionalising Adoption Report – June 2015
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/4 37128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

19. Contact details

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