From:	Roger Gough - Cabinet Member, Children, Young People and Education
	Matt Dunkley - Corporate Director, Children, Young People and Education
To:	Corporate Parenting Panel – 22nd March 2018
Subject:	**PROPOSAL TO DEVELOP A REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY**
Classification:	Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides the Corporate Parenting Panel with the outline of a proposal to develop a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) 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'.

The partnership is pleased to be able to confirm that on 14th February 2018 they received confirmation from the DfE that the Minister had agreed to fund its RAA project.

1 Introduction

1.1 In June 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) published 'Regionalising adoption'[1], announcing its desire that all LAs join larger regional groups of LAs and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) to radically redesign the adoption system in their areas and to provide excellent adoption services with a strong focus on innovation and practice. This was underpinned by the Children and Families Act 2014 and the recent publication 'Putting Children First: delivering our vision for excellent children's social care'[2] (DfE) published in July 2016. A further publication, 'Adoption: A vision for change'[3], set out the DfE's expectation that LAs become part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) by 2020 and, under the Education and Adoption Act 2016[4], the Secretary of State for Education now has the power to direct an LA to be part of an RAA. To support the realisation of

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf
[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/554573/Putting_children_first_delivering_vision_excellent_childrens_social_care.pdf
[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/512826/Adoption_Policy_Paper_30_March_2016.pdf
[4] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/6/crossheading/adoption?view=interweave

this strategic transformation of services, the DfE created a fund to support projects looking at developing RAAs.

1.2 RAAs are required to be registered adoption agencies that deliver adoption services on behalf of the LAs they represent. An RAA will have one pool of adopters and one pool of children and must ensure that VAAs are integral in their design and delivery. This means that RAAs are expected to deliver all adopter recruitment and assessment, matching and support functions.

2 The Development of the Regional Adoption Agency Programme

2.1 The development of RAAs across the country has been rolled out in three phases.

- Kent County Council (KCC) chose not to request inclusion in the RAA Programme in the previous phrases because of the decision to return the management of the adoption service back from Coram to KCC; it was felt the priority was to ensure this transition went smoothly.
- Medway Council and the London Borough of Bexley have worked together in a consortium arrangement over many years prior to the government's vision of the RAA programme. All three Authorities have been committed to progressing closer partnership working since 2016 in order to ensure that systems are in place in advance of the next phase of RAA development being announced.

2.2 The third phase of the development of the RAA' programme was announced in September 2017 and the expectation is that all local authorities will be part of an RAA by 2020.

3 Aims and Objectives of a Regional Adoption Agency

3.1 The key aims of an 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

3.2 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.

3.3 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 provided as it is 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 performance data within the adoption scorecard

4 Agreed Governance for Partnership Working within the three Local Authorities

4.1 There has been significant preliminary work undertaken to ensure there are appropriate structures in place to progress to an RAA:

- An Executive Board has been established with representation and membership from each the three local authorities, including Directors of Children's Services (DCS).
- An Operational Board has been established, which meets every six weeks and reports on the work plan to the Executive Board.
- There is currently no Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) representation on either the Executive or Operational Board.
- The governance model shown in Appendix A has been established to manage the partnership and gives equality to all local authority partners.

5 Scrutiny and Accountability

5.1 A proposal was presented to the former Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee in September 2016, which was asked to 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. This request was received positively.

5.2 An update to the Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee was provided in September 2017, which noted and endorsed the progress of partnership working and the continued development of an RAA with the London Borough of Bexley and Medway Council. Medway Council and the London Borough of Bexley have undertaken similar governance with their Cabinets and received agreement to proceed.

6 The Expansion of the Regional Adoption Agency Programme

6.1 In September 2017 Local Authorities that were not already included within a formal RAA were asked by DfE to submit a proposal to do so in December 2017.

6.2 A proposal was submitted on behalf of Kent County Council, Medway Council and the London Borough of Bexley in December 2017.

6.3 The proposal confirmed that the model proposed complied with the DfE definitions of what constitutes an RAA:

- Single line of accountability
- Core functions are transferred to the RAA
- Pan regional approach
- Recruitment, support and matching
- Each RAA to appoint a Head of Service with line management responsibility for staff in the RAA.
- Pooled funding
- Partnership with the voluntary sector

6.4 Options suggested by the DfE were considered by the Executive Board, the result of this exercise concluded that the preferred model would be to continue to work in partnership, with a view to moving to a shared service arrangement/single LA hosting on behalf of other LAs.

6.5 In February 2018, the DfE confirmed that the Minister had agreed to fund the RAA project. Communication with a member of the DfE RAA Project Team on 2nd March 2018 provided positive feedback on the proposal. It was described as being very strong, outlining clear plans. The DfE commented that successful progression of RAA projects have been where agencies have worked closely together previously.

6.6 The partnership is awaiting confirmation of the amount of government funding that will be provided for 'set up' costs. A Strategic Lead will be identified and a Project Manager appointed to drive through the various work streams in line with the project plan to ensure implementation in line with the government's timescale of 2020.   The Executive Board has agreed the KCC will lead on this.

7 Scope and Vision

7.1 Our vision is to achieve excellent outcomes for children through the formalisation and transformation of our partnership with the London Borough of Bexley and Medway in to a Regional Adoption Agency.

7.2 Based on a three year average of placement orders granted across all three local authorities, it is estimated that approximately 135-150 children annually will be placed by the RAA.

7.3 The court granted 92 Placement Orders in respect of Kent children in care in 2016/17 and 84 children were placed during this period. Kent Adoption Service is on target to approve 85 - 90 adoptive households during 2017/18. KCC has the largest number of children in care and the largest number of children for whom adoption is the plan within the three local authorities.

7.4 Areas under consideration for inclusion in the RAA include:

- Recruitment & Assessment – to provide the prospective adopters
- Permanence Planning – ensuring that children identified as requiring adoption achieve a placement
- Matching and Placement – to match prospective adopters with children in need to adoption
- Post Adoption Support – to provide ongoing assistance post placement and adoption order.

7.5 It is anticipated that the RAA will provide a larger pool of adopters, enabling KCC to have a larger number of adopters to choose from when identifying a good 'match' for a child. The development of an RAA, with a Head of Service responsible to the three local authorities through the Executive Board, will ensure clear lines of accountability. The streamlining of policies and processes will ensure greater efficiencies and the sharing and selection of best practice will ensure a consistent approach across the region.

8 Conclusion

8.1 On 14th February 2018 the partnership received confirmation from the DfE that the Minister had agreed to fund its project. The vision of the RAA is to provide a comprehensive service to meet the needs of children who have been or may become adopted, birth families, and adoptive parents.

> **Recommendation**
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> The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to **NOTE** the content of the report and **COMMENT ON** the proposed development of a Regional Adoption Agency with the London Borough of Bexley and Medway Council

9 Background Documents

9.1　Department for Education – Regionalising Adoption Report – June 2015
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

10 Contacts

10.1　**Lead Officer**
Caroline Smith
Interim Assistant Director, Corporate Parenting
03000 415091
caroline.smith@kent.gov.uk

10.2　**Lead Director**
Sarah Hammond
Interim Director, Specialist Children's Services
03000 411488
sarah.hammond@kent.gov.uk

Appendix A

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│      RAA EXECUTIVE BOARD        │
│   (Decision-making responsibility) │
│                                 │
│  DCS for each local authority with │
│         rotating chair          │
│                                 │
│   Heads of Service and Adoption │
│           Managers              │
│                                 │
│    Other staff from each LA as  │
│           required              │
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│       OPERATIONAL BOARD         │
│                                 │
│   Heads of Service and Adoption │
│      Managers from each LA      │
│                                 │
│  Other staff as required from each │
│              LA                 │
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│              MANAGEMENT TEAM                   │
│   │            │            │            │     │
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│  VAA's      LB Bexley      KCC        Medway  │
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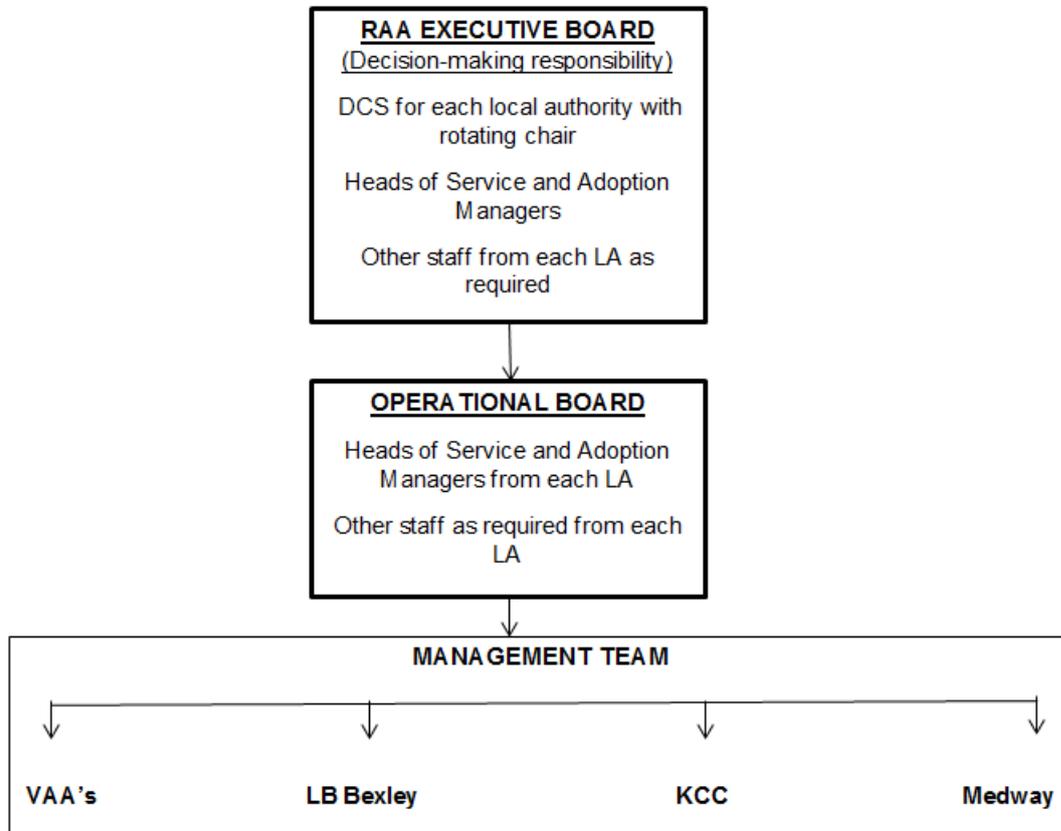
Role of the Executive Board

To maintain a strategic overview of the project and ensure the governance of the project at a senior and political level.

The core membership is made up of the Director of Children's Services from each of the three local authorities, Heads of Service and Adoption Managers. Other members can be co-opted at any time according to the needs of the project and thereafter the RAA. The Executive Board meets quarterly, and the DCS's Chair these meetings on a rotating basis.

Key functions
- Holding the Operational Board to account for the delivery of the project in accordance with the timescales, milestones and budget
- Ensure that the project meets with the strategic vision of each authority /organisation involved
- Ensure that proposed models of service delivery accord with those being developed in each organisation
- Ensure that proposed cost models are viable and can be recommended to Members
- Ensure that Chief Executives and Members are aware of the project and of key decisions required
- Make executive decisions as referred by the Operational Board