

From: Peter Oakford, Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services
Andrew Ireland, Corporate Director for Social Care, Health & Wellbeing

To: Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee – 20 January 2015

Decision No: 15/00004

Subject: Establishment of a Voluntary Adoption Agency

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway: 0-25 Portfolio Board

Future Pathway: N/A

Electoral Division: All

Summary: This report provides Cabinet Committee with the outline of a proposal to establish a new Voluntary Adoption Agency working in partnership with our improvement partners, Coram. The aim of the project is to achieve further progress in the Adoption services we offer, and to achieve earlier permanence and improved outcomes for children in the care system in Kent.

'Facing the Challenge' has identified adoption as a service to be considered for Phase 2 of the Transformation Programme. The proposal to establish a Voluntary Adoption Agency will follow the principles of service redesign outlined within the Facing the Challenge programme.

Recommendation(s):

Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee is asked to note the content of this report and to endorse or make recommendation to the Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services on the proposal to:

- 1) AGREE to establish Coram Kent Adoption, a voluntary aided agency (VAA), be undertaken to ensure the sustainability and continued improvements in the Adoption Service for Kent.
- 2) DELEGATE to the Corporate Director for Social Care, Health & Wellbeing, or other suitable officer, responsibility to implement this decision.

1. Background and Context of Kent's Adoption Service

1.1 The Adoption Service in Kent has been on a significant improvement journey since 2011. In July of that year, Martin Narey, the former Chief Executive of Barnardos was commissioned by the Council to carry out a review of its adoption services. This review was to establish what could be done to significantly increase the number of adoptions in the County and ways that the Council, working with the family courts, and improving its own processes, could speed up and streamline the process.

1.2 This report contained a number of recommendations, including one which suggested that KCC commission an independent provider specialising in adoption improvement services to manage the Council's adoption services and deliver the suggested improvements. As a result the County Council entered into partnership with Coram, a highly regarded children's charity with an established and successful track record. As well as working successfully in Kent, Coram have been successful in working under the sponsorship of the DFE and in partnership with other local authorities e.g. Harrow and Cambridgeshire.

1.3 The improvement journey of the partnership has been rapid and successful to date. Between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2014 145 children were adopted in Kent, which is significantly higher (38.1%) than the number of children adopted in 2012/13 (105) and over double (107.1%) the number of adoptions achieved in 2011/12 (70). In addition to this, a summer 2014 follow up review of the service by Jonathan Pearce who had led the Independent Improvement Board for Ofsted found that adoption in Kent now has considerable strengths.

1.4 A report on the progress review of Children's Services in Kent for the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families by Liz Railton CBE concluded that "impressive progress has been made in the Adoption Service, mainly due to a very effective contract between KCC and the voluntary organisation Coram.....Jonathan Pearce reports that there is strong evidence of drive, aspiration and ambition among the leaders, managers and staff to keep this service on a course of continuous improvement".

1.5 Concurrently the Department for Education (DfE) established a fund for the start-up of new Voluntary Adoption Agencies to generate more adoptive families and improve the effectiveness of adoption processes.

2. Establishing a Voluntary Adoption Agency in Kent

2.1 Coram with Kent as contributing partner has successfully submitted a bid to the Department for Education (DfE) for a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) start-up grant. Details of the grant will be confirmed in due course. The existing strategic improvement partnership between Coram and Kent County Council, in which Coram has been catalysing developments and adding expertise, is a positive basis to develop further into a new type of partnership in delivering permanence to children in need of adoptive families. It is now proposed to consolidate the existing arrangement with Coram by moving towards a fully managed service configured as a Voluntary Adoption Agency.

2.2 The setting up of a new VAA is an important step. It has a clear aim to provide a stronger supply of suitable adopters for often highly vulnerable children in immediate need of a placement. In doing so it must meet legal and statutory requirements of a VAA, be registered with Ofsted and perform to high standards in the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. It must also have robust systems for market advertising, handling enquiries, adopter preparation and training and post adoption support; it must have systems for effective leadership to induct, manage and support staff, supervise work to high professional standards and sustain effective and successful delivery.

2.3 Council's are encouraged to enter into such arrangements, and supported by central Government through the establishment of the fund. This is considered to be the most effective means for the council to establish a new service, and to meet the needs to children in care. The Council will discuss and negotiate with Coram to set up the most appropriate commercial method for contracting for these services. The Council will need to ensure that all the services requirements, risks and benefits are understood both and roles are clear on both parties and the obligations for achieving a robust commercial model for delivery is clearly documented and understood. If for any reason, that the Council is unable to negotiate with Coram the Council would need to look at other routes for contracting these services in the wider market place.

2.4 The stated objectives are to:

- increase adopter recruitment by adding capacity to attract and assess adopters to give a permanent home to children wherever they come from;
- achieve earlier permanence for children in the care system in Kent by increasing use of concurrent planning and fostering for adoption widening placement choices and options;
- increase productivity and sustainability through a shared delivery infrastructure.

Additionally a new VAA must progressively achieve propensity for increasing the supply of adopter placements within three years of it operating. To do this is likely to involve an innovative model of delivery agreed between the parties.

2.5 Alongside its key aim to deliver more adoptive placements the new organisation will enable best practice in the recruitment, assessment and training of prospective adopters, will increase the use of concurrent planning and fostering for adoption, widening placement choice and options and forging a strong communications approach that capitalises on existing networks and opens up new potential to the system.

2.6 The setting up of the VAA will include registration with Ofsted, the appointment of an Interim Manager, a subsequent appointment of a VAA Service Director. It will require infrastructure and professional resourcing with robust transition planning to ensure continuity of delivery as the VAA becomes established.

2.7 The new VAA will be developed in the context of related adoption reforms including resourcing of post adoption support that in turn should attract more people willing to adopt in the confidence of relevant support, as well as other national strategies aimed to change public attitudes.

The schedule of activities in the development of the VAA involves three key stages with significant interdependencies,

- i) formation and start-up,
- ii) coterminous investigation and options appraisal and decision, and
- iii) mobilisation and transformation for continued and enhanced delivery

Risk and contingency strategies will be put in place together with a Memorandum of Understanding to endorse the workings of the partnership.

3. Governance of the VAA

3.1 The governance of the VAA would be through a Coram Shadow Board with formal co-opted representation from Kent County Council, and legal, human resource and adoption practice leads in attendance. Both parties will have in place reporting and delegated authority arrangements within respective services. For Kent County Council this would include elected members, ensuring clarity of communication and decision making and effective harnessing of resources at all stages.

4. Links to Facing the Challenge – Whole Council Transformation

4.1 The Council wide transformation programme, 'Facing the Challenge' has included the Adoption Service for a service review as part of phase two. The aims of the programme are:

- place the customer at the heart of service delivery
- shape services around people and place
- look again at our services, the difference they make and whether there's a better way, taking a prompt from our customers and the people working close to them
- place a greater focus on outcomes - being clear on what we're trying to achieve
- a more coordinated approach to project and programme management

4.2 The project to create a VAA for Kent will meet all of these key aims. It will be stringently project managed through the Project Steering Group. The project has an appointed Project Manager in both KCC and Coram to ensure that delivery is effectively managed.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 An Executive level Project Board has been established to assess feasibility, and manage the development and establishment of a VAA in Kent. The Board includes representation from Lead Member for Specialist Children's Services and the Corporate Director for Social Care, Health & Wellbeing, with support from Officers representing different functions in the council.

5.2 The Board will have a remit to fully scope out all financial implications. Work is now underway between Coram and Kent County Council finance teams to identify the potential financial implications as part of the work of the project board. The financial envelope for the current Adoption Service and the expected costs for the

new VAA are comparable. In the longer-term this development is expected to deliver savings and significantly increase value for money – through improving outcomes for children in the care system.

5.3 There are start-up costs associated in the development of the VAA. The successful bid to the DfE is for funding to enable the set-up of the VAA, so the financial impact on the County Council will be cost neutral.

5.4 It is expected that KCC staff will transfer to the new VAA following establishment. When this happens, the pension liabilities for existing staff will remain with KCC. This is the approach that Coram has agreed where this model has been adopted elsewhere, and is considered as essential in order for them to manage the financial risks associated with this innovative arrangement.

6. Statutory, Risk and Legal Implications

6.1 Further work is required to consider the long term legal, contractual and procurement implications of a transfer of any of the functions currently within the Adoption Service to a VAA.

6.2 Key risks and issues are being identified as part of this work. A risk and issues log is being established as part of the Board workings, and will be regularly monitored and updated.

6.3 A full Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken in relation to the impacts of the new arrangements.

7. Location of the Voluntary Aided Agency

7.1 Currently, the Adoption Service is located at Oakwood House, Maidstone, which is part of the County Council's property portfolio. The Project Manager is working in conjunction with Property and Infrastructure Services within the County Council to assess the feasibility of the new VAA remaining at Oakwood House. This would ensure service continuity, and enable potential adopters to maintain the ability to travel easily to access the Adoption Service from all parts of the County due to its central location.

8. Conclusions

8.1 The council is proposing the formation of a new Coram and Kent County Council Voluntary Adoption Agency to capitalise on the improvements already made to the Adoption Service in Kent through the partnership in existence with Coram.

8.2 To put this in place will require a range of statutory, staffing and infrastructural arrangements. A Project Board is in place to oversee this development, with membership including the Corporate Director for Children's Services and The Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services. The board has now met twice, and progress is being made across all areas of the project and is on course to be in place by the Summer of 2015.

9. Recommendation:

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10. Background Documents

Appendix 1: Proposed Record of Decision

11. Contact details

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