



**From:** Roger Gough, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education  
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**To:** Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee – 7 September 2017

**Subject:** **UPDATE ON PROGRESS TO DEVELOP A REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY (RAA)**

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Previous Pathway of Paper:** Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee – 6 September 2016

**Future Pathway of Paper:** None

**Electoral Divisions:** All

**Summary:** This report provides the Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee with an update on the progress to develop a Regional Adoption Agency in line with the Government's expectations for Adoption Services. (A report was presented to the former Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee in September 2016.)

There has been agreement with three local authorities, Kent County Council, London Borough of Bexley and Medway Council, to progress increased partnership working to meet a longer term plan to implement a Regional Adoption Agency. To date the plan for has not secured government funding to support this development and this is being done within existing resources.

Key areas have been progressed since September 2016 including new governance arrangements; undertaking of financial benchmarking to understand budget allocation; partnership working to ascertain agreed financial principles and integrating social work practice with shared policies and procedures.

There are further areas that can be developed as a partnership including a review of commissioning of external contracted services and consideration of joint delivery of post-adoption services.

**Recommendation:** The Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee to **NOTE** the content of the report and **ENDORSE** the progress of partnership working and the continued development of a Regional Adoption Agency with the London Borough of Bexley and Medway Council.

## **1. Update on the Progress of Partnership Working and the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)**

1.1 In June 2015 the Department for Education (DfE) reported that local authorities should be working towards Regional Agencies by 2020. There is an expectation that local authorities will begin planning, developing and working with partners to shape their RAA. The DfE's 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.

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, permanent family as quickly as possible. The DfE would provide start-up funding to support local authorities to take forward their proposals. The vision for RAA is outlined in the Government paper Regionalising Adoption June 2015, which is provided as a background document to this report.

“We want regional adoption agencies to explore a range of new approaches to deliver models – be that local authorities joining together, voluntary adoption agencies joining local authorities or services operating outside of local authority control.”

1.3 In January 2017 the Council submitted both a funding application to the DfE to set up and progress a RAA and a supplementary funding application to progress as a centre of excellence on behalf of all three local authorities. However funding was not agreed for any new RAAs and this has impeded the progression to a RAA. Despite the failure to secure funding, all three local authorities are committed to progressing closer partnership working in order to ensure that systems are in place and are hopeful for funding in the future. A further application can be submitted when the DfE re-open applications for RAA funding although the government has not provided further information as to when future funding may become available. In the interim, the agreement is to pursue a partnership model of working with key governance and financial arrangements in place.

## **2. Agreed Governance for Partnership Working within the three Local Authorities**

2.1 There has been significant preliminary work undertaken to ensure there are appropriate structures in place to progress the RAA. An Executive Board has been set up and there is representation and membership from each of the three local authorities' Directors of Children's Services (DCS). Membership and attendance of DCS ensures that there is agreement at the most senior level to progress the operational work plan for a RAA. The Executive Board has met on a number of occasions and has given consideration to the Project Initiation Document (PID) which presented an outline for RAA development. The PID contained options for RAA development based on the experience and learning from other RAAs who were working with DfE mentors and had allocated RAA funding.

- 2.2 At the May 2017 Executive Board it was agreed with the three local authority DCS' that to move to an RAA without government support would contain operational risks and would be a significant step. Moving to an RAA would mean relinquishing the responsibility for adoption services by the three local authorities. Two models were considered, either a single outsourced independent unit responsible for the operational delivery of adoption services or one local authority being responsible for all adoption services.
- 2.3 Whatever model of operational delivery is progressed as part of a RAA there will be implications for social workers and their employment. The Executive Board considered that the progression of a RAA was not appropriate in the financial year 2017/18; however, closer partnership working would create the foundations for the eventual progression to a RAA and would not affect the remit of the local authority and the delivery of adoption services.
- 2.4 An Operational Board has been put in place which meets every six weeks and reports on the work plan to the Executive Board. The Operational Board is not a decision making body and cannot act without authorisation and agreement from the Executive Board.
- 2.5 The Executive Board meets every 12 weeks and has a rotating Chairperson and is the key arena for decision making.
- 2.6 There is currently no Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) representation on either the Executive or Operational Board. The Executive Board has decided that VAAs working with their local authority partner will be updated as to the progression of a RAA through their own individual local authority commissioning and contract arrangements. When there is progression to a RAA, there will be an open and transparent procurement process and VAAs can then apply to become formal RAA partners.
- 2.7 The governance model shown in Appendix A has been set up to manage the partnership and gives equality to all local authority partners.

### 3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 The three local authority partners have varying child population size and looked after children numbers. See Table 1 for further detail.

**Table 1**

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Number of looked after children at end March 2017</b>	<b>Rate per 10,000 excluding UASC*</b>	<b>Rate per 10,000 including UASC</b>
<b>Kent</b>	1,415 (excludes 483 UASC)	42.8	57.4
<b>Medway</b>	387 (excludes 3 UASC)	61.2	61.7
<b>Bexley</b>	205 (excludes 31 UASC)	36.6	42.2

\*Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

- 3.2 The partnership has been developing agreed principles through a Memorandum of Understanding. Further to this has been the need to understand what the current allocated resource is for adoption services for each local authority. A bench marking exercise is being undertaken to ensure that the investment in adoption services can be compared across the partnership and a formula for the unit costs pertaining to adoption services is being developed. This will provide information on investment in adoption staffing; adoption panel expenditure and recruitment of adopters. Consideration will need to be given to varying levels of investment and how these will be addressed by each local authority.
- 3.3 The information regarding unit costs was considered by the Executive Board meeting in August 2017 when the first comparators were considered.
- 3.4 The three local authorities generate income through the sale of their adoption services. Income is generally generated through the sale of adopters. A set of principles to take into account the differing levels of income generation across the three local authorities will be considered at future Executive Board meetings.

#### **4. Performance Data**

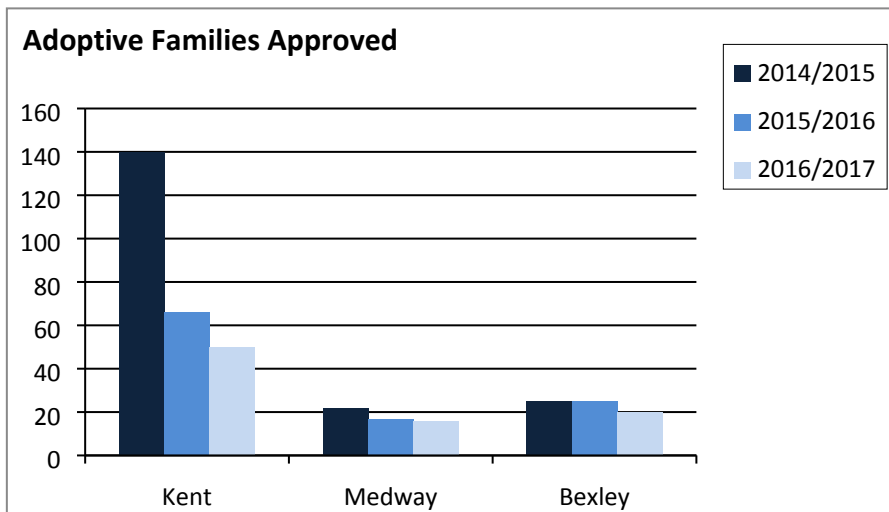
- 4.1 Adoption services in Kent, Medway, and Bexley reflect varying performance. The aspiration is to ensure that all three local authorities improve their adoption services in line with best practice and the most effective service delivery ensuring improvement in timeliness, with priority and focus on the child's needs. The performance data is currently collated and published through the adoption scorecard measures and these returns are made to the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB). Kent has recently been inspected and has been assessed as delivering good adoption services and excellent post adoption services. The indicators for the Kent adoption scorecard reflect an improving picture which is in line with the national benchmarks and in some areas better than national indicators.
- 4.2 Table 2 details the draft scorecard information for 2016/17. This has not yet been published or verified by the DfE. These are government stipulated performance targets.

**Table 2**  
**Draft Adoption Scorecard Indicators**

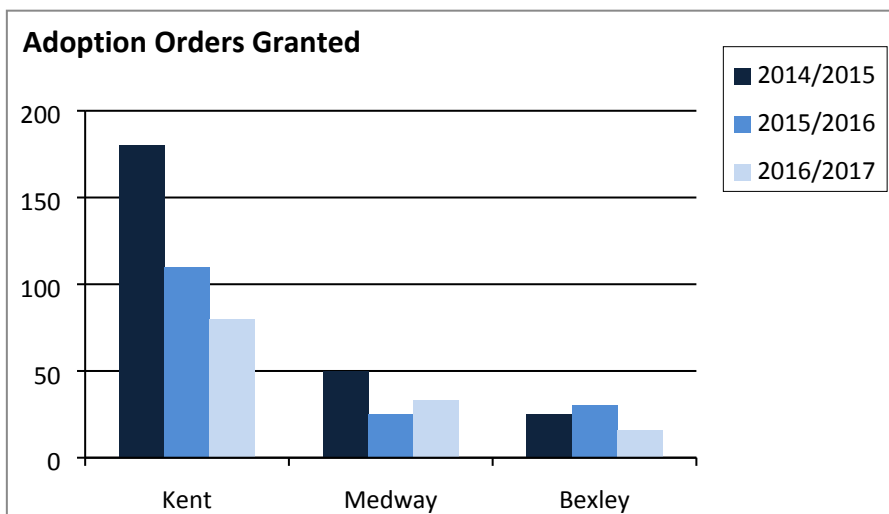
	<b>Kent 2016/17</b>	<b>Bexley 2016/17</b>	<b>Medway 2016/17</b>
A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days) (2016-17)	351	342	436
A2: Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days) (2016-17)	113	93	204
A3: Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (%)	76%	78%	70%
Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2016-17 who waited more than three months from approval to being matched to a child (%)	59%	70%	42%
Children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption during 2016-17 (number and %)	20 (9%)	2 (9%)	9 (8%)
Adoptions from care during 2016-17 (with % leaving care who are adopted, excluding UASC)	80 (12.8%)	16 (7%)	33 (19%)
A1 Timeliness for children who are adopted by their foster family (The measure is taken as the date the child moved in with the foster family) (days) (2016-17)	296	99	406

4.3 There are other key performance indicators that outline the scale and volume of the adoption service delivery in Kent and support information on adoption activity. Data is returned from all Local Authorities to the Adoption Leadership Board who work with the DfE to produce national adoption data and analysis.

**Table 3**  
**Adoptive Families approved in the Partnership**



**Table 4**  
**Adoptive Orders made in the Partnership**



**Table 5**  
**Placement Order Activity in the Partnership over three year period**

Local Authority	Placement Orders granted 2016/17	Placement Orders granted 2015/16	Placement Orders granted 2014/15
Kent	92	90	78
Medway	40	32	25
Bexley	10	17	22

## 5. Key work streams of the Partnership and Role of the Operational Board

5.1 The report presented to the Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee in September 2016 outlined the aims and objectives for a RAA. The Executive Board has agreed to progress the priorities which can improve the focus and outcomes for children and adopters. The Operational Board will focus on the key priorities noted below. All three local authorities were keen to progress as much of the work plan as possible even without additional government funding or increased staffing.

5.2 The key aims of the partnership are to:

- Bring together the three local authorities to have a single approach to permanency policies and embrace best and developing practice
- Ensure consistency of approach in the recruitment and assessment of adopters. Ensure that all those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice that they need to understand the adoption journey
- Review the adoption allowances to ensure these are consistent
- Consider post adoption and the Kent offer being extended if possible to the adopters of the other local authorities; this has been identified by Ofsted as an area of excellence
- Share best practice in relation to tracking and placement of children for whom adoption is identified as the plan
- 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 and this would be reflected in the adoption scorecard.

5.3 The key areas that will not be addressed through partnership working as a priority but will be reviewed in 2017/18:-

- Creating economies of scales for commissioned contracts; one lead commissioner to manage all adoption contracts on behalf of the three local authorities
- Centralised management and administration of adoption services including panels. This has to be subject to government funding and agreement from the local authorities to progress to an agreed model of the type of RAA that may be implemented.



## **6. Legal implications and Risks**

- 6.1 The legal issues and risks have been considered if the three local authorities were to move to a RAA. The risks of progressing to a RAA are highlighted above in relation to relinquishing operational responsibility for adoption services to an independent provider. Kent has recent experiences of procuring a new contract for the adoption service and was unable to secure a contractor.
- 6.2 The legal issues and risks regarding contracts, procurement and transfer of functions into the RAA would be similar to those experienced by the Council when considering contracting with another provider which affects employees' terms and conditions of employment including pension arrangements and continuous service.
- 6.3 Key risks and issues will be analysed should the local authorities be funded to progress to a RAA. A risk register will be produced and will be regularly monitored and updated as part of the work plan of the project board.

## **7. Commissioning/Procurement Issues and Risks**

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

## **8. Equality Implications**

- 8.1 There are no equality implications associated with this report.

## **9. Next Steps**

- 9.1 All local authorities will need to have agreement from their respective Corporate Boards and Cabinet Committees to deliver a partnership model of working with an option to progress a Regional Adoption Agency for Kent, Bexley and Medway if this becomes the preferred and funded model for adoption services.
- 9.2 A further submission will be made to the DfE for funding. If and when this becomes available, the local authorities will progress the preferred model of delivery of a RAA.
- 9.3 The three local authorities to continue with the current action plan to progress joint services including sharing of good practice, tracking adopter availability and sharing child level data, as far as possible without funding.



## 10. Recommendation

10.1 Recommendation: The Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee to **NOTE** the content of the report and **ENDORSE** the progress of partnership working and the continued development of a Regional Adoption Agency with the London Borough of Bexley and Medway Council.

## 11. Background Documents

Department for Education – Regionalising Adoption Report – June 2015

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/437128/Regionalising\\_adoption.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf)

Report on Regional Adoption Agency – Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee – September 2016

<https://democracy.kent.gov.uk/documents/s71782/ITEM%20C2%20-%20Regional%20Adoption%20Agency.pdf>

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