

Report to: **Governance Committee**

Date of meeting: **3 March 2020**

By: **Director of Children's Services**

Title: **Constituting panels as part of Adoption South East**

Purpose: **To outline the Adoption Panel arrangements to be constituted in support of the Regional Adoption Agency (Adoption South East) from April 2020, and the proposed ending of Member appointments to panels.**

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**The Governance Committee is recommended to recommend County Council to agree:**

- 1) to discontinue the appointment of Members to Adoption Panels with effect from 1 April 2020 and agree the new panel arrangements set out in the report to be constituted in support of Adoption South East; and**
  - 2) to delegate authority to the Assistant Chief Executive to amend the Constitution to reflect the changes to Adoption Panel arrangements.**
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## **1 Background**

1.1 In July 2019 the Lead Member for Children and Families approved the establishment of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) from the adoption services of Brighton & Hove City Council, Surrey and East and West Sussex County Councils to be known as Adoption South East (ASE). It was agreed that East Sussex be appointed as the lead authority. The establishment of ASE is in line with national legislation directing local authorities to form or join RAAs, reflecting the policy of central Government to rationalise the adoption sector, creating a smaller number of adoption agencies operating at regional level in place of the 180 agencies in operation in England in 2015.

1.2 The RAA will bring benefits such as an increased and more diverse pool of adopters through a shared regional recruitment strategy and resource, and greater choice and more timely placements for children in need of adoption. It will also enable the sharing of good and innovative practice, offering opportunities for regional initiatives, collaborative commissioning arrangements and the development of ongoing adoption support for adopted children and their families.

1.3 As part of the creation of the RAA, adoption panels will become shared between the authorities within ASE in order to minimise delay in approval of adopters and in matches between adopters and children, to establish, support and maintain shared standards of practice and process and to streamline and co-ordinate administration. Any panel within the RAA will be able to consider and make recommendations about potential adopters and matches from any part of the ASE area.

1.4 As indicated in the Lead Member report of July 2019 there has been a review of adoption panel arrangements to ensure they are fit for purpose in the context of the RAA. It has been agreed by the constituent authorities that ASE will, from April 2020, operate three panels located in Horsham, Woking and Uckfield. Once implemented, these will replace the current practice of having two panels each covering half the county.

1.5 The proposed membership of the ASE panels reflects statutory requirements. Elected Member involvement in adoption panels has not been a legal requirement since 2011, albeit we have continued to practise this. The current two East Sussex Adoption and Permanence Panels each include one councillor. However, the review of panel arrangements has identified that ESCC is the only authority within the ASE area currently appointing Members to this role. Given that panels will operate on a regional basis, able to make recommendations in relation to adopters and placements from any of the constituent authority areas, it is necessary for ASE to take a consistent approach to panel arrangements across the region, rather than to make arrangements which are specific to any

one part of the area. As a result, it is proposed to no longer include elected Member representation from individual authorities as part of the new panel arrangements.

1.6 Appointment to the ASE panels is via a recruitment process open to those meeting the relevant criteria, including experience or knowledge in relation to adoption, which may include experience gained through previous membership of an adoption panel. Appointments to ASE panels will be made under the existing delegation to officers set out in the constitution, amended to reflect the ending of appointments of councillors in their elected Member role. The proposed amendment to the Scheme of Delegation, Part D, Paragraph 39 is below with deleted text indicated:

*To appoint the members ~~(except for the appointment of any members who are County Councillors)~~ of the Adoption ~~and Permanence~~ panels in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2011.*

1.7 Panels will continue to have a broad membership and to perform a key role in advising and making recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker within the Local Authority on the suitability of adoption matches for children for whom the Agency Decision Maker has responsibility.

1.8 Members will continue to have oversight of the overall performance and progress of the RAA as part of the annual progress reports on Looked After Children's Services which are reported to Corporate Parenting Panel and to Cabinet each autumn.

## **2 Conclusion and recommendations**

2.1 In light of the creation of ASE, and the associated review of existing adoption panel arrangements operated by the constituent authorities, new shared panel arrangements are required to be put in place from April 2020 which are consistent with the regional approach to adoption. The new panel arrangements reflect the regional role of these panels and the need for consistency, in line with national policy. The Committee is recommended to recommend to County Council to agree the new panel arrangements and to end the appointment of Members to Adoption Panels in light of the new shared panel arrangements within Adoption South East, and to delegate authority to the Assistant Chief Executive to amend the Constitution to reflect the new Adoption Panel arrangements.

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