

Report to: **Corporate Parenting Panel**
Date: **24 July 2020**
Title of Report: **The launch of Adoption South East, the Regional Adoption Agency**
By: **Director of Children's Services**
Purpose of Report: **To update the Panel on the launch of the Regional Adoption Agency**

RECOMMENDATION:

The Corporate Parenting Panel are recommended to comment on and note the contents of the report.

1 Background

1.1 As Corporate Parenting Panel members will know, all Local Authorities in England are required to deliver their adoption services through a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) by December 2020. To this end the East Sussex County Council Adoption Service has worked towards becoming part of a RAA over 2019 / 20. Adoption South East (ASE) is a partnership between East Sussex, West Sussex and Surrey County Councils and Brighton and Hove City Council. The RAA is not a legal entity in its own right and therefore East Sussex County Council hosts the central functions of the RAA, employing the Head of Service and chairing the Executive Board through the Director of Children's Services (DCS), Stuart Gallimore.

The RAA provides:

- Equality of opportunity for all children in relation to family finding and placement for adoption.
- Proactive matching to mitigate the risk of delays
- Weekly linking and tracking meetings
- Monthly business meetings
- Creative approaches to family finding for children (currently impacted by Covid19).

1.2 ASE operates with a central hub team located in East Sussex at County Hall, and with four spoke offices; Woking, Horsham, Eastbourne and Brighton. Each Spoke is led by a Service Manager. Each spoke office undertakes the full range of adoption social work, with each Service Manager leading on an area of shared activity.

1.3 Adoption South East went "live" as a RAA on April 1st, 2020. It operates with a pooled budget, with its staff groups remaining on their sovereign terms and conditions in each of the partner Local Authorities. The operations of the RAA are underpinned by a partnership agreement between the four Local Authorities. Clearly the RAA has been launched during the Covid-19 pandemic which has added additional challenges to the way in which various activities can operate.

1.4 Adoption South East operates a regional Adopter Recruitment service and a regional child and family matching process. To support these two shared areas of operation, the

RAA operates a shared Adoption Panel. Adoption Support Services will be delivered locally over the course of 2020/21 during which time they will become aligned in order that a regional adoption support offer is established.

2. Recruitment and Assessment of adopters

2.1 This work was provided by the East Sussex Adoption Service for the reporting period (2019/20). The recruitment of adopters transferred to the RAA on April 1st, 2020. Please see Appendix 1 for information relating to ASE recruitment activity in Q1 and the comparison with the LA collective figures for the same period in 2019/20. It is too soon to determine whether the improvement in activity is related to the RAA or to the impact of Covid-19.

2.2 The RAA offers a regional end to end recruitment process for prospective adopters including for foster carers who wish to make a commitment to children already in their care, and applicants willing to offer Foster to Adopt placements. There is a RAA virtual recruitment team which provides;

- Dedicated centralised enquiry process
- Online Information Sharing sessions with enquirers
- Stage 1 and Stage 2 assessments
- Preparation to Adopt training (currently online)

2.3 Current volumes of activity

There have been:

- 305 enquiries since 1 April 2020 (go live)
- 115 Information sessions since 1 April 2020
- 55 Registrations accepted (applications) since 1 April 2020

Early data reflects that initial enquiries have increased significantly as has the rate of conversion of initial enquiries to initial interviews. Information Sessions are currently provided virtually as are Preparation to Adopt training courses. Adopter Assessments are being conducted via video call with applicants, with some face to face assessment social work being undertaken in order that we do not recommend applicants without meeting them in person or inspecting their accommodation. 34 adoptive households have been approved since going live on April 1st; these are assessments which were started whilst the adoption services were being provided directly by the Local Authorities.

2.4 The RAA will provide performance data to the Executive Board which comprises the DCS for each authority on a quarterly basis, and will provide an annual and half yearly report through our Executive Board.

2.5 Medical Advisors continue to provide medical advice in relation to children with plans for adoption, drawing on the LAC health assessments and undertaking face to face appointments with carers via virtual platforms.

3. Family finding and matching

3.1 East Sussex County Council Adoption Team undertook the work in placing children for adoption in the reporting period. The linking and matching of children for adoption has been the responsibility of the RAA since April 2020.

3.2 The RAA aims to identify ASE approved adopters for 80% of children referred into ASE by all 4 partner authorities and to have effective and efficient processes and systems to ensure matches are made in a timely manner. The remaining 20% of children are anticipated

to require interagency placement given that the profile of their needs identifies them as being children who will be harder to place for adoption given the national deficit of adopters who are looking for sibling groups, children from BAME backgrounds and children with diagnosed developmental disabilities or complex health needs.

3.3 Current volumes of activity are as follows:

- 59 children with a plan for adoption
- 38 Placement Orders in place
- 50 approved adopters
- Currently 5 interagency matches with ASE adopters
- Currently 5 interagency matches (children matched with other RAA (2)/Voluntary Adoption Agencies (3))
- 18 ASE children moving towards matching approval with ASE adopters (proceeding with links with Panel booked) including 4 sibling pairs
- 19 ASE children in linking and matching process with identified ASE adopters (including 2 sibling pairs)
- 11 children (5 sibling pairs and a single boy, aged between 21 months twins and 6 years) awaiting links with appropriate adoptive families.

4. Adoption Panels

4.1 Adoption Panels were operated by East Sussex Adoption Service throughout 2019/20. The work of Adoption Panels transferred to the RAA when it went live on April 1st, 2020.

4.2 In response to Covid 19, Adoption Panels are held virtually through video conferencing. The three Panel Chairs have embraced this new way of working. Post Covid the plan is for panels to be held on a weekly basis, based in Horsham, Uckfield and Woking. Three Panel Chairs were recruited in March 2020. Panel Members from the existing four authority Panels were invited to submit an expression of interest in relation to the Panel they wished to sit on, with Brighton and Hove and East Sussex merging their Panel membership; the Uckfield Panel replaces the previous East Sussex Panels and the Brighton and Hove Panel. Quoracy was agreed in the development phase of the RAA and elected members no longer sit on Panels in their capacity as elected members, however some members have continued to sit in their private capacity.

4.3 Panel meetings have worked well in terms of our processes and requirements and initial feedback from service users has been that this has worked well for them too.

5. Adoption Support

5.1 The regionalisation of Adoption Support Services will be part of a longer-term development plan for the RAA given the range of commissioned services in each spoke and differing degrees of integration with other services.

5.2 The priority since going live in the time of Covid-19 has been to ensure continuity of adoption support provisions and to ensure compliance on the part of all providers with the requirements of their accrediting bodies for the safe provision of virtual therapies.

5.3 During the pandemic there have been very few new referrals regionally for adoption support, notably fewer than at any other time and this is reflected nationally. There are requests for financial support where adoption allowances have previously been stopped due to means testing and household incomes have now reduced due to parents being placed on

furlough or unable to earn. Both agreement for payment and the cost of Adoption Allowances remain with ESCC. £350k of additional funding for Covid-19 specific support for adopters and special guardians has been secured through a shared application between the RAA and the four Special Guardianship Services.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Despite the impact of Covid-19, the RAA has been launched and has made a strong start. East Sussex is acting as the host authority with the agreement of all partner authorities. Governance and finance agreements are in place and will be overseen by an Executive Board. Performance will also be reported to the Executive Board.

6.2 In addition to an encouraging start in relation to local performance, regionalisation has enabled greater connection with the other RAAs across England, and with the Department of Education who are better able to consult the sector. Additional Government funding for the recruitment of adopters has been used collectively in order to boost recruitment of adopters, with a national adopter recruitment campaign launching in the autumn of 2020. National standards in relation to adopter recruitment and assessment are being developed and RAA leaders meet regularly to share learning and good practice, which has been invaluable to the local and national response to Covid-19 and in keeping services working well.

7. Recommendation

7.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel are recommended to comment on and note the contents of the report.

STUART GALLIMORE

Director of Children's Services

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Adoption South East (ASE) Comparison Data Q1 2019/20 and Q2 2020/21

Contact Officer:

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