

Portfolio Holder Meeting

Date of Meeting: 24th March 2020

Report Title: Regional Adoption Agency – Adoption Counts. Finances and TUPE implications

Portfolio Holder Cllr Katheryn Flavell, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families

Senior Officer: Mark Palethorpe, Executive Director of People

1. Report Summary

1.1. This report will update the Portfolio Holder for children on the progress in adoption services since Cheshire East joined Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption Counts in July 2017. In 2015 the government sought to change the way adoption services were delivered nationally with objectives to:

- Increase the number of children adopted.
- Reduce the length of time children wait to be adopted.
- Improve post adoption support services to families who have adopted.
- Reduce the number of adoption agencies thereby improving efficiency and effectiveness.

2. Recommendations

2.1. The decision to extend the current partnership agreement has been delegated to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Families.

2.2. The Portfolio Holder for Children and Families is recommended to approve the extension of the current arrangement to provide service continuity

pending the completion of a new partnership agreement expected by October 2020.

2.3. Key decisions regarding future arrangements will be made by Cabinet.

3. Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1. Cheshire East has experienced success as a result of our collaboration within the regional arrangements and the next appropriate step will be to make permanent the staffing arrangements via TUPE and to ensure efficiencies in the use of an activity based financial contribution. A Cabinet paper is planned with this recommendation alongside the other four Local Authorities once approved by Stockport as the host Local Authority.
- 3.2. As far back as 2015 Cheshire East, under the instruction of the government have been planning to transition into regional arrangements. We along with 4 neighbouring authorities became Adoption Counts in July 2017 following a lengthy and detailed implementation process. The government made it clear that all local authorities were required to be the part of regional arrangements by 2020 or risk being forced to enter one.
- 3.3. Adoption Counts in its early planning were identified by the DFE as being innovative and expert in their thinking around regionalisation and so following their bid application, received a request from the DFE to be one of 5 'demonstrator' projects, leading the way in regionalisation. This request from the DFE attracted significant investment from the government to the regional adoption agency and was invaluable in the planning and implementation stages.
- 3.4. Central government are clear that regionalisation of adoption is the way to deliver services and continue to invest in research to evaluate the success of regionalisation. To strengthen their approach they have for several years aligned significant funding sources that can be accessed by adopted children and adopters to support these families post adoption (Post Adoption Support Fund). The trajectory for adoption will continue in its current state for many years to come. Therefore our own relationships within regional arrangements will be strengthened and build upon the success that has been achieved to date.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. It is not an option for Cheshire East to withdraw from its relationship within the Regional Adoption Agency. The governments thinking and philosophy of 2015 was strengthened in law in 2016 by the Education and Adoption Act and therefore it is highly unlikely that there will be a move away from this.

5. Background

5.1. In July 2017 Adoption Counts launched as the Regional Adoption Agency for 5 North West local authorities and became responsible for the delivery and management of adoption services, with offices in Salford, Wythenshawe and Middlesbrough. This was facilitated through an integrated services agreement (“ISA”) and associated support agreement between the 5 North West regional authorities with Stockport MBC appointed as lead authority and the creation of a Management Board with agreed terms of reference. The regional arrangement sought to:

- Provide children with the right adopters at the right time, approving those equipped to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption.
- Minimise the number of children having plans changes away from adoption and back into long term care situations.
- Reduce delay in achieving adoption and the timeliness from placement order to final adoption order.
- To improve early permanency planning for children, avoiding unnecessary delay.
- To encourage concurrent planning and foster to adopt.
- To be innovative in achieving adoption for ‘hard to place’ children.
- To prepare children for their plans of adoption.
- To reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown.
- To form strong partnerships with adoption and voluntary sector providers.

5.2. The partnership agreement provides for services to be supplied by Stockport MBC and a third party Provider “Adoption Counts” through the secondment of staff from the participating North West authorities. It is necessary to extend Adoption Counts and Cheshire East’s participation in these arrangements to ensure service continuity. A subsequent decision will then be made by each individual local authority to create sustainability within the regional arrangements and for Stockport to mitigate potential risks as a result of the ongoing secondment arrangements by the other 4 local authorities. In order to allow sufficient time to make these key decisions an extension is requested to the current agreement as the new arrangements will not be in place before the existing arrangement expires.

6. Implications of the Recommendations

6.1. Legal Implications

- 6.1.2 The Proposed extension to ISA will create financial obligation for the Council and services delivery obligations for Stockport MBC and Adoption Counts. It will be an extension of the existing ISA, which has proved to be durable, the legal risks to the Council can be viewed as being acceptable.

6.2. Finance Implications

- 6.2.1 A finance workshop was undertaken on 25th February 2020 to further scrutinise planned changes to the agreement, moving to an activity-based model and the potential financial impact for Cheshire East.
- 6.2.2 The estimated cost to extend this agreement between 18th March 2020 and July 2020 would be around £340k, which could result in an overspend of around £82k for the four and a half month extension period. This overspend would need to be met via the wider Children's Social Care budgets, as this cost sits within the Cared for Children line of the Children's Social Care Team Plan.
- 6.2.3 The Financial Implications for the new agreement from July 20 onwards will be calculated and approved in line with the Councils usual Governance processes.

6.3. Policy Implications

- 6.3.1 There are no policy implications as a result of this report.

6.4. Equality Implications

- 6.4.1 There are no implications as a result of this report.

6.5. Human Resources Implications

- 6.5.1 There are no implications as a result of this report.

6.6. Risk Management Implications

- 6.6.1 There are no risk management implications as a result of this report. There are robust governance arrangements in place for the Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption Counts.

6.7. Rural Communities Implications

- 6.7.1 There are no direct implications for rural communities.

6.8. Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children

6.8.1 There are risks for children and young people if our regional arrangements end given the clear direction from central government which is further reinforced in law. Children with plans of adoption are more likely to receive a good quality timely offer as a result of our regional arrangements.

6.9. Public Health Implications

6.9.1. There are no direct implications for public health.

6.10. Climate Change Implications

6.10.1. The Regional Adoption agency arrangements ensure that more children with plans of adoption can be placed with adoptive families living in or near to Cheshire East.

7. Ward Members Affected

7.1. Cared for children reside within all Wards and all ward members have corporate parenting responsibility and therefore it is the collective responsibility of officers and members to ensure that adoption services are delivered in line with government objectives and achieve the very best outcomes for children and young people.

8. Consultation & Engagement

8.1. The adoption counts leadership board have agreed to the recommendations of this report and have engaged and consulted within Adoption Counts and also with local authorities individually.

9. Access to Information

9.1. Corporate Parenting Committee has been regularly updated about the statistical and operation benefits of our regional arrangements.

10. Contact Information

10.1. Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

Name: Kerry Birtles

Job Title: Head of Service – Cared for Children and Care Leavers

Email: Kerry.birtles@cheshireeast.gov.uk