


REPORT TO CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY BOARD

16th November 2020

Subject:	Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2019/20
Cabinet Portfolio:	Cabinet Member for Best Start in Life
Director:	Executive Director for Children's Services - Lesley Hagger
Contribution towards Vision 2030:	
Contact Officer(s):	Lesley Hagger – Executive Director for Children's Services

DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Scrutiny Board:

1. Receives the Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2019/20;
2. Considers the performance of the first year of the Regional Adoption Agency and provides summary feedback to the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board.

1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 At its meeting on 7th January 2019 it was agreed that the performance of the new arrangement for the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) would be reported to and scrutinised by the Children's Services and Education Corporate Parenting Board.
- 1.2 The new organisation has been operational since 1 April 2019 and an interim performance report was presented to the Scrutiny Board in November 2019.

- 1.3 The first full year of performance is now set out in Adoption@Heart's Annual Report 2019/20. The Annual Report also includes some performance information for 20/21.

2 IMPLICATIONS FOR VISION 2030

- 2.1 High quality adoption services improve the life chances of vulnerable children and young people and ensure that all children are offered an equality of opportunity in the way that they are matched with an adoptive family. Adoption offers children a new start in life.

3 BACKGROUND AND MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 The provision of an adoption service is a statutory requirement and the council is required to monitor the provision of adoption services. The government agreed that all local authorities (LAs) would be expected to deliver their adoption services through an RAA by 2020 and funding was provided by the Department for Education (DfE) to cover the costs of setting up these new arrangements.
- 3.2 On 12th December 2018, Sandwell Council's Cabinet gave approval to transfer adoption services to the new Regional Adoption Agency: Adoption@Heart. These arrangements were considered by the Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 7th January 2019 when it was also agreed that the Scrutiny Committee would undertake the role to scrutinise these arrangements and report its findings to the Corporate Parenting Board, which is chaired by the Lead Member for Best Start in Life.
- 3.3 The RAA for the Black Country local authorities is called Adoption@Heart. The arrangement is a 'hosted' model, whereby the adoption service is hosted by Wolverhampton City Council on behalf of the four Black County local authorities and commissioned on their behalf via Dudley Council. Contractual arrangements are in place for all partners. The adoption service has an operational interface with each local authority children's service; in Sandwell, this is Sandwell Children's Trust.

4 CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 Adoption@Heart has now been operating for just over 18 months. The number of children adopted in the 12-month period 2019/20 has increased on the previous year performance, and in 20/21 the number of children placed has increased by approximately 20% compared to the previous year.

- 4.2 In the first year of operation, forty one percent of children placed were from Sandwell and consequently numbers placed for the other three partners were considerably lower. This was due to the fact that more Sandwell children were waiting on Placement Orders at the point the service became operational. In the first six months of the current year, this has levelled out with thirty three percent of children placed being from Sandwell.
- 4.3 Key areas of focus for the first year, as set out in the Annual Report, have been on adoption support, early permanence in placing children, adopter recruitment, and increasing adopter engagement and consultation.
- 4.4 Adoption panels have operated since early April 2019 across the four Local Authority / Trust locations on a weekly basis. Panels have approved 51 Adopters and matched 107 children in the year 2019/20 (100 children placed in year). In the first six months of 2020/21 panels have matched 67 children with adoptive parents (62 placed with adopters) and approved 34 adopters.
- 4.5 Whilst the first year of operation for Adoption@Heart had its challenges, as with the creation of any new organisation, performance has been good, and Sandwell has received a particularly high level of support, as shown in the performance data contained within the report.

5 CONSULTATION (CUSTOMERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS)

- 5.1 During the process of establishing Adoption@Heart there was full consultation with children, young people and families, and with staff that were transferred via a TUPE arrangement from Sandwell Children's Trust to Adoption@Heart.

6 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS.

- 6.1 The framework set out in the report approved by the Emergency Committee will result in the development of plans to enable the organisation and the borough to recover from the impact of COVID-19, therefore alternative options are not required at this stage. When developing approaches and determining specific activities, it will be essential to consider alternative options to ensure the most appropriate way forward is agreed.

7 STRATEGIC RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 At the inception of the Regional Adoption Agency, the financial contributions were based on the budgets already in existence in the four individual local authorities. Sandwell's budget for 2019/20 was £1.22m, which equates to 24.4% of the budget. The budget has remained the

same in 2020/21. Discussions about future budget arrangements are currently ongoing.

8 LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 A contract is in place between the four Black Country local authorities to commission Adoption@Heart, and the organisation is hosted by Wolverhampton Council. A Strategic Commissioning Board meets on a quarterly basis to monitor the contract. The commissioning process is managed via Dudley Council. The Strategic Commissioning Board is chaired by Sandwell Council.
- 8.2 An Operational Board meets monthly to ensure high quality oversight of the operational business. A further meeting is also in place to ensure the successful interface between Adoption@Heart business and the social care practice in each local authority/Trust.
- 8.3 An annual meeting of Lead Members is also set out in the governance document, although, due to Covid pressures, it has not been possible for that group to meet and a meeting is now being set up to take place before the end of this financial year.
- 8.4 Annual scrutiny and assurance is provided in Sandwell via the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board, which then makes its comments available to the Corporate Parenting Board. In Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton, the scrutiny and assurance process takes place within the Corporate Parenting Board meeting.

9 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 Adoption@Heart undertakes its own equality impact assessments. Ensuring that diversity and equality has a prominent focus is a key feature of the RAAs work.

10 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 10.1 A Data Protection Impact Assessment is not required.

11 CRIME AND DISORDER AND RISK ASSESSMENT

- 11.1 There is no requirement to carry out a Crime and Disorder and Risk Assessment.

12 SUSTAINABILITY OF PROPOSALS

- 12.1 The sustainability of Regional Adoption Agencies was addressed in the Cabinet paper that gave the approval to establish Adoption@Heart and are specifically set out in one of the Schedules for the Contract between SMBC and the Regional Adoption Agency.

13 HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING SOCIAL VALUE)

- 13.1 The immediate impact of COVID-19 on the performance of Adoption@Heart are set out in the Annual Report. It will be important to continue to monitor the impact via the Strategic Commissioning Board.

14 IMPACT ON ANY COUNCIL MANAGED PROPERTY OR LAND

- 14.1 There is no impact on council managed property or land.

15 CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 15.1 Adoption@Heart is providing a good service to Sandwell.
- 15.2 The Annual Report presents a robust set of performance information.
- 15.3 The oversight of quality and performance through management processes and governance arrangements is clear and regular.
- 15.4 There are clear objectives for the future – particularly in the areas of adopter recruitment and communication/PR.

16 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 16.1 Cabinet report -12th December 2018
Scrutiny reports – 7th January 2019, 11th November 2019

17 APPENDICES:

Appendix A – Adoption@Heart Annual Report

Lesley Hagger
Executive Director for Children's Services