

LJR 1008

Report to CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY BOARD

23 August 2021

Subject:	Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2020/2021
Director:	Executive Director of Children's Services, Lesley Hagger
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1 Recommendations

- 1.1 Receives the Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2020/21;
- 1.2 Considers the performance of the second year of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) and provides summary feedback to the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board.


2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 At its meeting on 7 January 2019 it was agreed that the performance of the new arrangement for Adoption@Heart the Regional Adoption Agency would be reported to and scrutinised by the Children's Services and Education Corporate Parenting Board.
- 2.2 Adoption@Heart has been operational since 1 April 2019 and a performance report was presented to the Scrutiny Board in November 2020 covering the first year of operation



2 1.3 The second full year of performance is now set out in Adoption@Heart's Annual Report 2020/21.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>Best start in life for children and young people</p> <p>Ensuring that children have the Best Start in Life is a key driver for Adoption@Heart; ensuring that children are safeguarded, protected and, when unable to live with their parents, are effectively cared for.</p> <p>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.</p>
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4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 On 12 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 7 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.



- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 Adoption@Heart has now been operating for just over 2 years. The number of children adopted in the 12-month period 2020/21 has increased by 25% on the previous year performance.
- 4.5 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 because more Sandwell children were waiting on Placement Orders at the point the service became operational. In 2020/21 this has levelled out with twenty-eight percent of children placed being from Sandwell.
- 4.6 Key areas of focus for the second 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.
- 4.7 Panels have approved 69 Adopters and matched 124 children in the year 2020/21.
- 4.8 Adoption@Heart has adapted well to the challenges imposed by the pandemic and has continued to perform well, this is shown in the performance data contained in the annual review.

5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 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.

6 Implications

Resources:	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. This is monitored quarterly by the Strategic Commissioning Board.
Legal and Governance:	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
Risk:	The corporate risk management strategy has been complied with and has concluded that there are no significant risks that require reporting and that suitable measures are in place to mitigate the risks identified to acceptable levels.
Equality:	An Equality Impact Assessment screening is not required for this report. However, 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
Health and Wellbeing:	The 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
Social Value	Adoption@Heart supports children to achieve, feel safe, be supported and access opportunities. Adoption@Heart supports community resilience through the recruitment of local residents as adopters

7. Appendices

Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2020/21

8. Background Papers

Cabinet report -12 December 2018

Scrutiny reports – 7 January 2019, 11 November 2019, 19 November 2020

