

Report to Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

11 September 2023

Subject:	Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2022/2023
Director:	Director of Children and Education, Michael Jarrett
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1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receives and comments on the Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2022/23;
- 1.2 That the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Considers the performance of the fourth 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 7th 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, further reports have been provided annually.
- 2.3 The fourth full year of performance is now set out in Adoption@Heart's Annual Report 2022/23.

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 a 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 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 Children and Education.



- 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 4 years. The number of children adopted in the 12-month period 2022/23 has fallen compared with previous year's 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 subsequent years this levelled out with 27% of children placed being from Sandwell in 2020/21 and 28% in 2021/22. This year's performance has been largely maintained with twenty-seven percent of children placed being from Sandwell
- 4.7 Panels have approved 40 Adopters and matched 91 children in the year 2022/23. There has be a fall of 11.6% in the number of children matched compared to 2021/22. There has been a reduction in the number of adopters approved nationally.
- 4.8 There has been a reduction in the number of enquiries from potential adopters in 2022/23, falling to 541 enquires compared to 609 in the previous year.
- 4.9 Ofsted undertook inspection of adoption services in Sandwell in December 2022, the outcome of this was a judgement of good.



5 Alternative Options

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6 Implications

<p>Resources:</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>The contribution levels for each partner is based on an agreed formula and varies annually based on level of service provision. Sandwell’s budget contribution for 2022/23 was £1.367m. This was an increase of £48.5k on 2021/22, however there was an underspend in 2021/22 of approx. £48k that off-set this increase.</p>
<p>Legal and Governance:</p>	<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 Dudley 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. The risks associated with the RAA are included in the directorate risk register.
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 is 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 2022/23

