

The Regional Adoption Agency Project

1. The Government is committed to far reaching changes in how Local Authorities organise adoption services and fulfil their statutory responsibilities in respect of adoption. This was a manifesto commitment and there is legislation in the form of the Education and Adoption Bill going through Parliament which will require Local Authorities to merge adoption services to form Regional Adoption Agencies by the end of this Parliament if they do not voluntarily do so.
2. There is also funding available from the Department for Education to support those who choose to voluntarily explore and implement changes leading to the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council, The Borough of Poole and the voluntary agency Families for Children were successful in obtaining funding to 'Scope and Define' options for a local RAA. The funding in this phase is available to the end of March 2016, with the expectation that more funding will be available for proposed RAAs to bid for in 2016-17 to develop and deliver their proposals. Families for Children are leading on this initial phase of the project.
3. The rationale for creating larger Regional Adoption Agencies is that the existing adoption system is seen by the Government as highly fragmented. There are about 180 adoption agencies (Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies) currently providing adoption services across the country. Having a system that is fragmented in this way is seen as reducing the scope for broader strategic planning, as well as specialisation, innovation and investment. RAAs, where services are delivered on a greater scale and with more opportunities for innovative approaches to practice, are seen as having real potential to improve outcomes for children. Organising adoption services on a larger scale will allow for more focussed recruitment of adopters, a greater pool of adopters to match children with across the region, opportunities to deliver improved adoption support services and should also produce efficiency savings through economies of scale.
4. The invitation to bid for funding was published by the Department for Education on 19th June 2015, in a paper entitled Regionalising Adoption, the web link for which is included elsewhere in this report. The closing date for applications was 7th September 2015. Bournemouth took the lead in coordinating the Expression of Interest, a copy of which is included as Appendix B.
5. Significant progress has been made locally since the Department for Education funding bid was approved as successful in early October. The project lead is the Deputy Chief Executive of Families for

Children. A project manager was appointed in December 2015, and a Project Board has been set up consisting of the project manager, and team managers and service managers of adoption services in each agency. The Project Board has met monthly since early October 2015. The Project Initiation Document has been written and agreed and is included as Appendix C.

6. Four work streams to look at the main statutory adoption functions of recruiting, assessing and training prospective adopters, permanency planning for children, family finding matching and placement, and adoption support have been established. These are led by one of the team managers and include adoption practitioners and other stakeholders from across the agencies. The work streams are mapping out current processes in each agency and looking at how these could be discharged in a single agency to help define potential organisational structures and delivery models.
7. A Management Board is being set up to include the Directors of Children's Services in each agency or their nominees, and the Chief Executive of Families for Children.
8. The original financial bid has been redefined and up to £100,000 has been committed to the local RAA project for the initial 'Scope and Define' phase of the project.
9. The Department for Education are also providing coaching in addition to funding and the Project Board has met with a coach on two occasions. Opportunities for representatives of those projects which were successful in their funding bids to meet together are also being provided by the Department for Education. The first of these was held in November 2015, with a further meeting planned for February 2016.
10. A coordinated communication strategy is being developed to coordinate the dissemination of information across the four agencies and as part of a staff engagement policy. An initial newsletter was sent out to staff in all four agencies in December 2015.
11. The project is keeping to timescales but with much more to do. By the end of March 2016, the project needs to deliver an outline business case to include a proposed service delivery pathway across the four work streams, a recommended organisational structure to support the proposed service design, options appraisals of the operating models, a cost benefit analysis, and a transition plan with key milestones.