

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

BRIEFING NOTE – No. 04/17

Date: October 2017

Briefing paper to: All Members of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Purpose: Update on the progress to develop a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)

Regional Adoption Agency Update

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In June 2015 the Department for Education (DfE) reported that local authorities should be working towards Regional Agencies by 2020. There is an expectation that local authorities will begin planning, developing and working with partners to shape their Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). Their commitment to this approach is such that the Education and Adoption Act 2016 has given power to the government to direct a local authority to enter into a RAA.

A report on the proposed establishment of a RAA was considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 October 2016. Noting the comments of the scrutiny Committee, the Cabinet subsequently agreed on 25 October 2016, in principle, to enter into formal dialogue with a view to the establishment of the RAA with the local authority partners, London Borough of Bexley and Kent County Council subject to formal agreement from the Cabinet on the findings (decision no. 124/2016).

The Government vision behind the regionalisation of Adoption Services is to accelerate the pace of change to ensure those children, for whom adoption is the right path, are given the best chance of finding a loving, forever family as quickly as possible. The DfE would provide start-up funding to support local authorities to take forward their proposals.

In January 2017 Kent County Council led, with input and agreement from Medway Council and London Borough of Bexley, and submitted both a funding application to the DfE to set up and progress a RAA and a supplementary funding application to progress as a centre of excellence on behalf of all three local authorities. Both funding applications were turned down and this has impeded the progression to a RAA. Despite the failure to secure funding, all

three local authorities are committed to progressing closer partnership working in order to ensure that systems are in place and are hopeful for funding in the future. A further application can be submitted when the DfE re-open applications for RAA funding, although the government has not provided further information as to when future funding may become available. In the interim, the agreement is to pursue a partnership model of working with key governance and financial arrangements in place.

There has been significant preliminary work undertaken to ensure there are appropriate structures in place to progress the RAA. An Executive Board has been set up and there is representation and membership from each of the three Local Authorities' Director of Children's Services (DCS). Membership and attendance of DCS ensures that there is agreement at the most senior level to progress the operational work plan for a RAA. The Executive Board has met on a number of occasions and has given consideration to the Project Initiation Document (PID) which presented an outline for RAA development. The PID contained options for RAA development based on the experience and learning from other RAAs who were working with DfE mentors and had allocated RAA funding.

At the May 2017 Executive Board it was agreed by the three local authorities, with each DCS present, to move to closer partnership working but not immediately to move towards creating an RAA without government support; moving immediately to an RAA without funding from government would contain operational risks and would be a significant step. Moving to a RAA would mean relinquishing the responsibility for adoption services by the three local authorities with a single independent unit responsible for the operational delivery of adoption services or one local authority being responsible for all adoption services; both models would require the involvement of a voluntary adoption agency and appropriate procurement rules would need to be followed.

Whatever model of operational delivery is progressed as part of a RAA there will be implications for social workers and their employment. The Executive Board considered that the progression of a RAA was not appropriate in the financial year 2017/18; however, closer partnership working would create the foundations for the eventual progression to a RAA and would not affect the remit of the local authority and the delivery of adoption services.

An Operational Board has been put in place which meets every six weeks and reports on the work plan to the Executive Board. The Operational Board is not a decision making body and cannot act without authorisation and agreement from the Executive Board.

The Executive Board meets every 12 weeks and has a rotating Chairperson and is the key arena for local decision making.

There is currently no Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) representation on either the Executive or Operational Board. The Executive Board has decided that VAAs working with their local authority partner will be updated as to the progression of a RAA through their own individual local authority commissioning and contract arrangements. When there is progression to a RAA, there will be an open and transparent procurement process and VAAs can then apply to become formal RAA partners.

On 4 October 2017, the Department for Education held a “Regional Adoption Agencies Expansion Event” which has indicated the continued expectation that all Local Authorities will be part of an RAA by 2020. In order to support this continued expansion, the DfE has committed a financial package to support each Local Authority with their plans, based on the number of looked after children. At the time of writing the amount to be awarded is not yet determined. The DfE has also committed “coaching” support to aid each RAA with their plans.

The DfE also asked Local Authorities who were not yet in a formal RAA to indicate their plans to form an RAA going forward and Medway Council, Kent County Council and London Borough of Bexley have all sent formal letters to the DfE indicating their plans to work towards forming an RAA.

The three local authority partners have varying child population size and looked after children numbers. See Table 1 for further detail.

Table 1

Local Authority	Number of looked after children at end March 2017	Rate per 10,000 excluding UASC*	Rate per 10,000 including UASC
Kent	1,415 (excludes 483 UASC)	42.8	57.4
Medway	387 (excludes 3 UASC)	61.2	61.7
Bexley	205 (excludes 31 UASC)	36.6	42.2

*Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

The partnership has been developing agreed principles through a Memorandum of Understanding. Further to this has been the need to understand what the current allocated resource is for adoption services for each local authority. A bench marking exercise is being undertaken to ensure that the investment in adoption services can be compared across the partnership and a formula for the unit costs pertaining to adoption services is being developed. This will provide information on investment in adoption staffing; adoption panel expenditure and recruitment of adopters. Consideration will need to be given to varying levels of investment and how these will be addressed by each local authority.

The information regarding unit costs was considered by the Executive Board meeting in August 2017 when the first comparators were considered.

The 3 local authorities generate income through the sale of their adoption services. Income is generally generated through the sale of adopters. A set of principles to take into account the differing levels of income generation across the 3 local authorities will be considered at future Executive Board meetings.

Adoption services in Kent, Medway, and Bexley reflect varying performance. The aspiration is to ensure that all three local authorities improve their adoption services in line with best practice and the most effective service delivery ensuring improvement in timeliness, with priority and focus on the child's needs. The performance data is currently collated and published through the adoption scorecard measures and these returns are made to the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB).

Table 2 is the draft scorecard information for 2016/17 which has not yet been published or verified by the DfE.

**Table 2
Draft Adoption Scorecard Indicators**

	Kent 2016/17	Bexley 2016/17	Medway 2016/17
A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days) (2016-17)	351	342	436
A2: Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days) (2016-17)	113	93	204
A3: Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (%)	76%	52%	70%
Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2016-17 who waited more than three months from approval to being matched to a child	59%	70%	42%
Children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption during 2016-17 (number and %)	20 (9%)	2 (9%)	9 (8%)
Adoptions from care during 2016-17 (with % leaving care who are adopted, excluding UASC)	80 (12.8%)	16 (7%)	33 (19%)

	Kent 2016/17	Bexley 2016/17	Medway 2016/17
A1 timeliness where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days) (2016-17)	296	99	406

There are other key performance indicators that outline the scale and volume of the adoption service delivery in Kent, Medway and Bexley. Information has been obtained through the ALB.

Table 3
Adoptive Families approved in the Partnership

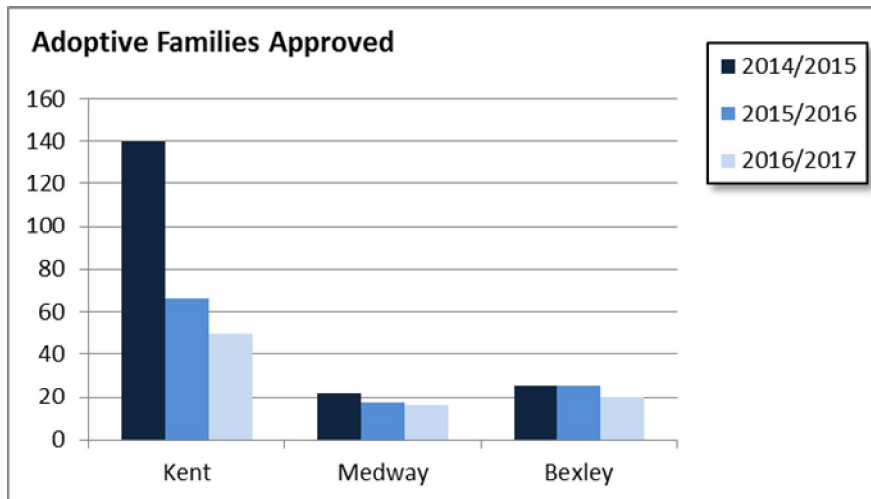


Table 4
Adoptive Orders made in the Partnership

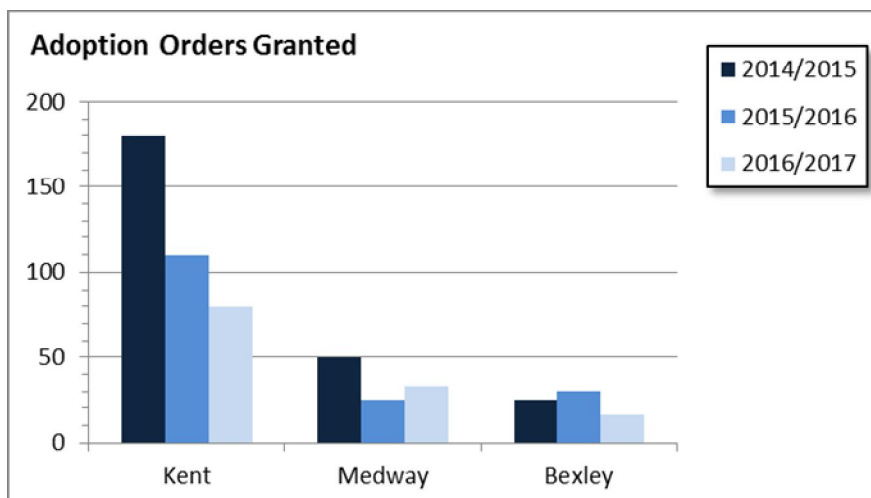


Table 5

Placement Order Activity in the Partnership over three year period

Local Authority	Placement Orders granted 2016/17	Placement Orders granted 2015/16	Placement Orders granted 2014/15
Kent	92	90	78
Medway	40	32	25
Bexley	10	17	22

The Executive Board has agreed to progress the priorities which can improve the focus and outcomes for children and adopters. The Operational Board will focus on the key priorities noted below. All three local authorities are keen to progress as much of the work plan as possible even without additional government funding or increased staffing.

The key aims of the partnership are to:

- Bring together the three local authorities to have a single approach to permanency policies and embrace best and developing practice;
- Ensure consistency of approach in the recruitment and assessment of adopters. Ensure that all those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice that they need to understand the adoption journey;
- Review the adoption allowances to ensure these are consistent;
- Consider post adoption support services and consider whether those currently offered by Kent through partnership working with Coram could be extended to the adopters of Medway and Bexley;
- Share best practice in relation to tracking and placement of children for whom adoption is identified as the plan;
- Early identification of children for whom adoption is the right option;
- Timely placement of all children including sibling groups and older children;
- Placements which are sustainable with the right support as needed;
- A sufficient range and number of adopters able to parent children with a wide range of profiles and needs, enabling more children to be placed “in house”;
- Making available a range of different adoption placement types, including early placement approaches such as Fostering for Adoption; and
- To have an effective and well performing service and this would be reflected in the adoption scorecard.

The key areas that will not be addressed through partnership working as a priority but will be reviewed in 2017/18:-

- Creating economies of scales for commissioned contracts; one lead commissioner to manage all adoption contracts on behalf of the three local authorities; and
- Centralised management and administration of adoption services including panels. This has to be subject to government funding and agreement from the local authorities to progress to an agreed model of the type of RAA that maybe implemented.

The three local authorities will continue with the current action plan to progress joint services as detailed in this briefing note. All three local authorities will need agreement from their respective Cabinets to deliver a partnership model of working with an option to progress an RAA if this becomes the preferred and funded model for adoption services.

Kent County Council and the London Borough of Bexley heard an update on the RAA at the meetings of their Cabinets on 7 September and 19 September respectively. Both Cabinets noted the report and progress. An update will be presented to Medway Council's Cabinet on 21 November 2017.