

<b>CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>	AGENDA ITEM No. 6
<b>8 MARCH 2023</b>	<b>PUBLIC REPORT</b>

Report of:	Ricky Cooper, Assistant Director, Children's Services	
Cabinet Member(s) responsible:	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education, Skills and the University Councillor Lynne Ayres	
Contact Officer(s):	Ricky Cooper, Assistant Director Children's Services	Tel. 01223 699609

**REVIEW OF THE REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY ARRANGEMENTS**

RECOMMENDATIONS	
<b>FROM:</b> Ricky Cooper, Assistant Director Children's Services Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education, Skills and the University, Councillor Lynne Ayres	<b>Deadline date:</b> N/A
<p>It is recommended that the Children and Education Scrutiny Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Note the contents of the report.</li> <li>2. Raise any queries with officers.</li> </ol>	

**1. ORIGIN OF REPORT**

1.1 This report has been written by the Assistant Director for Children's Services at the request of the Committee.

**2. PURPOSE AND REASON FOR REPORT**

2.1 The report is presented to Committee to update on the overall progress and achievements of the Regional Adoption Agency for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The RAA, hosted by Cambridgeshire County Council, created in response to the legal requirement that authorities regionalise their adoption services, discharges PCC's statutory duties in relation to the recruitment of adopters, the identification and matching of children with suitable adopters and post adoption support, including birth records counselling for adopted adults as well as the delivery of special guardianship support.

2.2 This report is for the Children and Education Scrutiny Committee to consider under its Terms of Reference No. Part 3, Section 4 - Overview and Scrutiny Functions, paragraph No. 2.1 Functions determined by Council:

1. Children's Services including
  - a) Social Care of Children;
  - b) Safeguarding; and
  - c) Children's Health.

2.4 This report relates to all elements of the Children in Care Pledge.

### 3. TIMESCALES

Is this a Major Policy Item/Statutory Plan?	<b>NO</b>	If yes, date for Cabinet meeting	<b>N/A</b>
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### 4. BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

4.1 This report is the first report to the Scrutiny Committee regarding the work undertaken and the governance arrangements for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Adoption – the Regional Adoption Agency for Cambridgeshire County Council & Peterborough City Council.

The Agency is responsible for adoption services on behalf of Cambridgeshire County Council & Peterborough City Council. Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council collaborated to establish Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Adoption, which is a hosted model, hosted by Cambridgeshire County Council and started from December 2020. The Regional Adoption Agency was created in response to the legal requirement that authorities regionalise their adoption services.

#### **Governance Arrangements:**

The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) is responsible for providing adoption and adoption support services across both Peterborough and Cambridgeshire. PCC and CCC have collaborated since December 2020 to provide a shared adoption agency service hosted by CCC and supported by a formal partnership agreement.

The written Partnership Agreement outlines specific roles and responsibilities between the two Authorities, as well as governance arrangements required for overseeing service provision and terms of the partnership.

Governance is provided substantially by the ‘Regional Adoption Agency Partnership Board’ which is chaired by the Assistant Director of Fostering, Regional Adoption & Specialist Young People’s Services, and comprises key service personnel including finance and commissioning managers as well as operational colleagues. An adopter also sits on the Board which provides a richness of user participation and challenge in relation to service developments through the lens of a consumer/service user.

As per the Partnership Agreement, the RAA is funded by a designated percentage contribution between PCC (30%) and CCC (70%), taking into account indexation in line with local pay awards, other changes in staff pay, changes in the type of service provided, or any changes in law, government policy, guidance and best practice.

In May 2022, an Internal Audit was completed by a Senior Auditor for Peterborough City Council. The Audit concluded that there was evidence of regular and effective RAA Partnership Board meetings which monitor service provision and performance. It found that the requirements of the RAA Partnership Agreement are generally being adhered to, although there are opportunities to further enhance compliance and build on existing RAA governance arrangements, including RAA Partnership board membership and attendance.

Since then, there have been clear communication to board members with regards to their attendance and there has been significant improvements with membership attendance.

There is a Service Plan in place for the Regional Adoption Agency and this outlines to plans for the service. This includes:

- Targeted Recruitment of Adopters
- Streamline process for adopter assessment and matching for children.
- Evolve the training offer for adopters
- Increase the use of Early Permanence placements
- Expand the involvement of adopters in the service delivery
- Expand the therapeutic offer in the RAA

## **Overall Performance:**

### **There are many aspects that are working well:**

- The full transition and embedding of services, processes and procedures is ensuring families are provided with a consistent experience, resulting in a higher conversion rate and a lower dropout rate of prospective adopters
- Strong Early Permanence placement offer of dual approved Concurrency and Foster to Adopt placements to children under 2 years of age to promote strong attachments for children and the avoidance of trauma caused by a placement change
- Effective joint working relationships with the Family Safeguarding Teams to ensure early internal matching where adoption is likely to be the plan and an earlier move into their permanent family
- Assessment and approval timescales are reducing for all types of placement which contributes to increasing the speed in which children are placed with their permanent families

### **What needs to improve**

- Faster access for adoptive and special guardianship families to support so that families can make positive changes sooner and reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown
- Bridging the growing 'adopter gap' for children who need adoption by increasing the pool of adopters so that children have permanent families more quickly
- Faster adoption planning for relinquished babies to ensure these children achieve permanence at the earliest opportunity

### **Priority actions**

- Embed and increase the use of triage assessments in the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Team to enable families to access support quickly and for reports to courts to be timetabled and submitted with more urgency
- Develop a stronger web-based marketing strategy and presence that is informed and driven by the needs of children placed for adoption
- To ensure improved access for adopters and special guardians to therapeutic parenting support in a group training setting that will strengthen family relationships by implementing the evidenced based Foundation for Adoption model.

## **Performance Q1-Q3 (April - December 2022):**

### **Children –**

	April – December 2022
Total Number of children Placed with Adopters	35 of which 11 are Peterborough City Council Children
Early Permanence Placements	13 of which 6 are Peterborough City Council Children
Number of Adoption Orders Granted	40 of which 15 are Peterborough City Council Children
Number of children waiting to be placed (with a Placement Order or a plan for adoption) (as of 31 <sup>st</sup> December 2022)	43 of which 19 are Peterborough City Council Children
Number of New Best Interest Decisions Plans for Adoption (as of 31 <sup>st</sup> December 2022)	50 of which 24 are Peterborough City Council Children

It is acknowledged that there was a slower start to the year for the number of children placed for adoption, however this has steadily increased, and we have a further 11 children linked for adoption and will be presented to the Adoption Panel for matching by the end of Q4. We continue to have positive performance for early permanence placements linked to our 'opt-out' approach to adopters. This is strengthened with lead practitioners in Recruitment & Assessment and Family Finding liaising with the Safeguarding teams to ensure early identification. We have currently placed 13 children in Early Permanence Placements. For the same period at the end of Q 3 for 21/22 we had placed 10 children. This indicates strong performance.

The ASGLB data for end of Q2 supports our positive performance and it shows the positive impact that the Regional Adoption Agency is having for children. We have continued to have high % of children exiting care via adoption (19%) as well as the number of children adopted who were previously in an early permanence placements (41%). The timeliness of matching children for adoption & placing children for adoption for Peterborough City Council has remained consistently good and being significantly lower than the national average.

The national trend is that the number of children with a plan for adoption and being made subject to a placement order has been declining and remains low. For Cambridgeshire and Peterborough there has been different pattern and has maintained consistency in this. Peterborough City Council has had 24 new plans for adoption by the end of December 2022 and children are placed for adoption swiftly. Of the children who are waiting to be placed for adoption, no child has been waiting for longer than 7 months and this is significantly better than the national data and Eastern Region average who both have 30% of children waiting for longer than 8 months.

It is important to also consider Adopter Gap for the Regional Adoption Agency – this is an analysis on the gap between the number of adopters available compared with the number of children needing adoptive parents. As of Q2 the National Adopter Gap is +68% indicating that there is an excess of adopters available. The Eastern Region has a +166% mirroring the national trend with there being an excess of adopters available. However, the data for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Adoption is very different. We currently have a -16% adopter gaps indicating that we have less adopters available for children (21 adopters available for 32 children). This highlights the importance of continuing to actively promote adoption to recruit adoptive parents and have a creative marketing strategy.

## Recruitment of adopters:

	April – December 2022
Number of Enquiries	222
Number of applications commencing Stage 1 (A22)	31 – this is a 14% conversion from enquiries.
Number of adopter approvals (A21)	23

It is acknowledged that the number of adoptive approved this year to date is lower than we have anticipated. It has become clear the enquiries remain high and we have seen an improvement in the conversion to application we ensured a proactive approach to initial interviews and application.

There are some positive messages with regards to recruitment – the numbers of enquiries, initial interviews and applications to adopt are increasing which give positive base for the numbers over the next 12 months. We have continued to hold regular information sessions and include a combination of face to face and virtual. The dedicated Recruitment Officer that continues to be a positive addition to the team to ensure consistency in our approach.

We are also aware of the need for adopters for children who are deemed harder to place – primarily siblings and children over 5 years old. We have, and continue to, promote adoption for siblings via our social media, however we also recognise that we need to explore if we can create more of those in assessment to have the desire and skills to adopt siblings. We are reviewing the training provided for siblings and looking into ways in which we can strengthen our offer. We plan to create a new video and podcast to promote adopting a sibling group that we can use as part of a marketing campaign as well as training materials for those currently in assessment.

### Marketing & Recruitment:

We have made significant progress with improving and updating the website and the final adjusted website has been completed and there will be an approach to continuously improve the website. We have continued to broaden our social media presence with the launch of our Instagram page.

One of the positive messages from the marketing over the past few months is that we have seen an increase in the number of enquiries, a total of 222 in 9 months which is greater than this time last year (202). We have had a dedicated Marketing Assistant since January 2022, and this has had a significant positive impact

We continue to support national adoption campaigns including National Adoption Week in October and #YouCanAdopt in June and LGBTQ+ Fostering & Adoption Week in April – within these campaigns we develop our own marketing materials to ensure they have the national and local approach and extend the campaigns beyond the national dates where necessary. The RAA has an active marketing strategy that runs throughout the year with a strong presence on social media platforms.

## Adoption & Special Guardian Support:

	April – December
Number of Referrals for Initial Assessments	90 (Adoptive families – 55, Special Guardianship families – 35)
Number of referrals for adult support	40
Number of Initial Assessments completed	104
Value of approved ASF applications	£544, 139

The demand for the service continues to exceed the capacity, however it is important to note that this is a theme nationally for Regional Adoption Agencies.

The Adoption Support Fund has continued to be an area of significant benefit for families securing since April a total grant received from the DfE for £544,139 of therapeutic support. To date most of this is support commissioned for external providers. The RAA continues to explore options to up skill our current workforce in the delivery of specific therapeutic interventions as a contingency should the ASF cease. Funding for the ASF has been extended to March 2025.

## 5. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

5.1 This report links to the following Council's Corporate Priorities:

- Our Places & Communities*
  - *Health and Wellbeing*
- Prevention, Independence & Resilience*
  - *Children*

Further information on the Council's Priorities can be found here - [Link to Corporate Strategy and Priorities Webpage](#)

## 6. CONSULTATION

6.1 NA

## 7. ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES OR IMPACT

7.1 NA

## 8. REASON FOR THE RECOMMENDATION

8.1 This report is just for noting but Officers invite comments from Committee Members.

## 9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

9.1 NA - There are no alternative options to consider.

## 10. IMPLICATIONS

### Financial Implications

10.1 No financial implications.

### Legal Implications

10.2 There are no legal implications, as this report is for information.

## **Equalities Implications**

10.3 *NA*

### **11. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

11.1 *None*

### **12. APPENDICES**

12.1 *None*

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