



# Northumberland

## County Council

### **Families and Children Overview and Scrutiny**

**Date: 5<sup>th</sup> September 2019**

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#### **ADOPT NORTH EAST – Update**

Report of Executive Director of Adult Social Care & Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr

Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Cllr Wayne Daley

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#### **Purpose of report**

- 1.1 To update members on the developments and progress within Adopt North East since launch, and priorities for future development.

#### **Background**

- 2.1 Adopt North East was launched on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2018. It brings together adoption functions for five local authorities: Northumberland, North and South Tyneside, Newcastle and Gateshead, into a regional adoption agency hosted by North Tyneside Council. The core functions of the agency are to recruit and assess adoptive families for children across the region, undertake family finding and matching activity as well as providing post adoption support for families who have adopted. The service key priorities are to ensure there are sufficient adopters for our children, children with a plan for adoption are placed without delay and that adoptive families are well supported from placement until the child becomes an adult.

#### **Progress since launch**

- 3.1 Staff transferred to the host authority as the service went live and were relocated to the Adopt North East premises in Longbenton. During the set up phase (December 2018 – January 2019) all of the service staff was trained on the new host systems giving them access to the various systems and processes as employees of the new agency. Systems were put in place to ensure effective continuity of service for adopters and families transferring from each LA, alongside managing new enquiries from prospective adopters and families requiring post adoption support. Given the inevitable complexities of the undertaking this transfer worked well and was a credit to all the staff involved both in the new RAA and those remaining within the LA.

3.2 In a number of RAA's there has been a significant dip in recruitment of adopters in the months following the launch of the service and it was gratifying to note this was not the case for Adopt North East.

### **3.3 Governance Arrangements**

3.3.1 Governance arrangements were set out prior to the launch of Adopt North East and the Executive Board took over responsibility for the oversight of the RAA from the project team. The Board, comprising of children services directors from each LA, met monthly for the first six months and have now moved to a quarterly meeting cycle as the RAA becomes more established. The Board retains overall responsibility for the performance of the RAA on behalf of the elected members. The Board provide scrutiny and strategic oversight of the performance and financial management, in line with the agreed vision and service priorities. A programme of twice yearly meetings with key elected members is currently being arranged, and will provide an opportunity for members to receive updates and provide scrutiny ensuring the needs of adopted children and their families are being met.

3.3.2 Reporting to this is a Senior Leaders Group which comprises of assistant directors and meets monthly. They ensure that the critical relationship between local authority and RAA is effectively managed and provides the detailed scrutiny of the performance of the RAA at a strategic level.

3.3.3 Underpinning this is the operational managers from both LA and RAA working together to ensure that services are delivered effectively and any issues that arise are addressed in a timely manner. One key element of the service is to ensure that Adopt North East is fully aware of all children who may have a plan for adoption so family finding and matching can begin at the earliest opportunity. To achieve this, the family finding manager meets regularly with managers in the permanence team.

3.3.4 The Governance arrangements have worked well thus far and will be reviewed from time to time to ensure they continue to support the effectively delivery of services for children with a plan for adoption.

3.3.5 At present we are arranging to bring adopters and adoptive children together as part of our stakeholder engagement strategy to ensure they are can shape the development of Adopt North East going forward

### **3.4 Staffing**

3.4.1 The key focus for the early part of 2019 was a significant recruitment campaign to address a number of vacancies which had accrued in the run up to the service going live. Management vacancies were filled through existing ring-fenced staff in January 2019. Social Worker and Business support vacancies were recruited to during February and March with the agency becoming fully staffed in June 2019. During this period the workload

continued to be managed using a combination of agency staff and other staff completing specific pieces of commissioned work.

- 3.4.2 The interim Senior Manager was appointed to the position permanently in March 2019. Since then there have been a small number of changes but the staff team is now established and stable. This in turn has started to free up capacity within the RAA to shift the focus from maintaining current interim operational delivery to a focus on service development.
- 3.4.3 As part of that process the Senior Leadership Group commissioned a six month post implementation review of the service structure which has recently been concluded. As RAA's are a new type of organisation, a number have undertaken a review at this stage. As previously stated recruitment of adopters has remained strong since the launch of the service as have the levels of matching activity (see below for detail). In addition there have been significant and sustained demands for Post Adoption Support which has created a significant on-going pressure on this aspect of the service. As a result the review concluded that there was a need to increase capacity within the service particularly in regard to the management and oversight of panels. In addition there was a need to ensure that our recruitment strategy was clearly aligned with the profile of children with a plan for adoption. To achieve this the RAA have realigned management accountabilities within the service to ensure there is now a full time panel manager and that recruitment and family finding are brought together under a single manager. These changes will take place in September and will be reviewed in another 6 months.

### **3.5 Service Development**

- 3.5.1 One of the anticipated benefits from the creation of the RAA was the opportunity to develop a single consistent way of working across the region and ensuring that this approach reflected the best practice for each area of service delivery. Other RAA's which have been operating significantly longer than Adopt North East have recognised this is not a quick process as it necessitates not only changes in working practice but establishing a new culture which ensures that the RAA are working with adopters to meet the needs of our children with an increasingly complex set of needs. Service Development is managed through the implementation plan which is regularly reviewed by the Senior Leaders Group alongside any emerging risks and issues.
- 3.5.2 When the service was launched the RAA quickly put in place an interim set of procedures covering, recruitment, assessment, family finding, matching and post adoption support. In order to ensure continuity it was agreed that panel arrangements would transfer in March to allow for the recruitment of panel members and the establishment of a new panel process which would allow panel papers to be access through a portal for all cases. Panel Approvals and Matches are now considered by the Adopt North East panel with Northumberland retaining the agency decision for matches in line with

our corporate parenting responsibilities. Responsibility for indirect contact between adopters and birth families is a particularly sensitive area given the large amount of families involved. I am pleased to report that this area of activity has been successfully transferred and is now being managed from Adopt North East.

- 3.5.3 Since July the RAA has initiated a number of strands of service improvement activity. The recruitment team have been working to raise the profile of Adopt North East through attendance at key local events such as Northern Pride. Alongside this the team have been working with North Tyneside's Marketing team to create a social media profile including a Facebook page which is regularly updated with news and events. In addition we place adverts in local print media using local authority publications wherever possible to reach the widest population. Marketing leads across the region have met to look at how they can maximise the exposure of the RAA across the region in the most effective way. RAA's across the northern region are also working collaboratively in the lead up to National Adoption week to ensure the event has maximum impact. Adopt North East is also working with other RAA nationally on a national recruitment campaign for adopters.

There is a regular programme of information evenings for those wishing to take the next step. These have been well attended since their inception with over 30 attendees for the most recent event in August.

- 3.5.4 Adopter preparation training courses are run every month and the team are reviewing all of the current materials used across the region to develop an Adopt North East training model. There is a training programme for staff undertaking assessments to ensure a single consistent model of assessment is in place across the region. Panel members will receive this training later in the year. Adopters who are waiting for placements are working with Adopt North East staff to put together a training plan to maintain and improve their skill base during this period
- 3.5.5 Family finding teams have reviewed processes for internal and external family finding, introducing an early notification system alongside a system of planning and review to ensure all children have plans which will maximise the potential for successful placement and minimise delay. The team are working in partnership with Northumberland managers to design a portal to effectively manage matching across the region with the aim of maximising the placement of children within the region. This portal will use the Linkmaker platform currently in operation across the region and will give improved visibility and reporting capacity for children across the RAA region.
- 3.5.6 A strong adoption support offer is critical in promoting adopters capacity to manage an increasingly complex set of needs for children with a plan for adoption. Established RAA's identify this service area as being the one where delivery across the RAA partners varies the most. Adoption Support staff are currently working to integrate the range of services currently available into a single consistent support offer. The team is re-establishing a

regular programme of support and training for adopters. Recently the RAA held its first 'region wide' summer event which was highly successful attracting 55 adoptive families and 63 children. Adoption Support has from the outset been an area of significant demand and has required the provision of additional resources from within the current staff provision (See Key issues and Challenges below)

- 3.5.7 Across all service areas managers are working with service improvement staff from North Tyneside Council to produce a tailored set of guidance and procedures for LA and RAA staff around working with adopters, children with a plan for adoption and families receiving adoption support. These will be available in September. Alongside this, the RAA is working with the Early Permanence Project to identify the on-going training and support needs for staff in this specialist area.

#### **4. Performance**

- 4.1 The recruitment of adopters and matching of children are the key performance areas for Adopt Northeast. Each month the RAA responds to an average of 40 enquiries per month for individuals looking to adopt. At any one time there are over 50 adoptive families being assessed.
- 4.2 Since April 2019, thirty five adoptive household have been presented to panel for approval and thirty one families have been matched with children across the region.
- 4.3 Using the most recent data available Northumberland has the highest number of children with a match (17). In terms of the time it takes from placement order to match, over the last quarter Northumberland is slightly higher (162 days) than the RAA average (147 days). This is likely to be due to the high level of ambition that the authority has to place older children and children with more complex needs.

#### **5. Key issues and challenges**

- 5.1 The establishment of a regional adoption agency requiring the transfer of staff and services to a new organisation is a noteworthy achievement for the partner LA's. Alongside the significant achievement since the launch of Adopt North East there have been some major challenges.

##### **5.1.1 Staffing**

- 5.1.2 The service went live with a number of vacancies across management, social work and business support roles. This was in part due to a number of staff making the positive choice to remain with their previous employer. In addition, vacancies which occurred shortly before the launch of the RAA were put on hold so they could be recruited by the host authority.

5.1.3 The impact on this was to create a range of operational challenges as staff sought to launch the RAA alongside maintaining the progress on current assessments and matches. In order to manage this effectively the RAA has focussed on delivering core services, pushing back development activity as a result. Contingencies to manage the operational pressures were put in place during the recruitment period and in the last three months the pace of development activity has been increased.

## **5.2. Data**

5.2.1 The transfer of case records to the host authorities recording system was intended to be delivered using a technical solution. As a precursor to this, host authorities were to complete an exercise which would allow the data to be transferred using the agreed IT process. Close to the launch of Adopt North East a number of queries were raised by partner LA's about the permissions covered by the data sharing agreement. This meant that the data transfer was delayed until after the commencement of operations by some considerable period. For some LA's, the format in which case records and other data was held, presented additional challenges in facilitating the transfer. Despite high levels of commitment by all parties to the resolution of this issue, it persisted across the first six months of the operation of the RAA. The impact of this was that staff were working to progress the early stages of children's placements without complete information. As a result placements could not be made until all parties were assured that all the relevant information had been provided which initially caused delay in some cases. Staff were innovative and flexible in working together to resolve the issues this presented putting children's needs at the forefront. Data remains a legacy issue for one partner LA.

## **6. Key Priorities for the next six months**

6.1 The next phase of Adopt North East's development will focus on completing the current service development phase in line with the Implementation Plan. The Senior Leadership Group will be providing oversight and scrutiny of this activity on behalf of the Executive Board. Specific priority areas include:

Refining the Marketing and Recruitment Strategy to ensure sufficiency of adopters aligned to the specific profile of our children with a plan for adoption across the region.

- Developing a regional portal based to maximise the capacity to place children without delay using the locally available resource.
- Confirming the core post adoption support offer with key stakeholders, developing a three tier delivery model of universal, targeted and tailored services
- Delivering a robust performance dataset to provide assurance around the timeliness and quality of placements for children

- Widening the scope of stakeholder engagement to ensure children and adopter voice is heard and acted upon as Adopt North East develops.

## **7. Summary**

- 7.1 The partner LA's have successfully managed the transition of adoption services to Adopt North East and created a functioning RAA which is a significant achievement. The agency has managed the initial challenges it faced and has, more recently, been able focus on service development that will drive up the quality and timeliness of adoption services across the region. There remains a significant body of work to be undertaken to achieve all of the benefits originally envisaged when the RAA was proposed. Given the strong track record of cooperation between authorities and the strong foundation on which Adopt North east is building, there is no reason to doubt that the agency will emerge as a centre of excellence for adoption delivering excellent outcomes for children and families.

## **8. Recommendations**

It is recommended that members note the content of the report

## **9. Link to Corporate Plan**

This report is relevant to the Living priority included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021.

## Implications

<b>Policy</b>	The development is in line with the national adoption agenda as set out in the DfE paper “Regionalising Adoption” (June 2015)
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	<p>The financial agreements and contribution from NCC have been previously agreed as part of the final business case.</p> <p>These are monitored as part of the governance and oversight arrangements for ANE which are detailed in the report</p>
<b>Legal</b>	<p>The Government has signalled a clear intention that by 2020 all local authorities will be part of regional agencies. The Education and Adoption Act 2016 makes provision for the Government to direct a local authority to have its adoption functions carried out on its behalf by another authority or adoption agency where such provision has not already been made by the Authority.</p> <p>The development of ANE triggered the obligations placed on the Constituent Councils under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 and these obligations have been followed during the setting up of the agency.</p> <p>The full legal implications of the proposals have been addressed in the previous report to Cabinet at the point that Cabinet gave final approval to the proposals</p>
<b>Procurement</b>	.
<b>Human Resources</b>	LA staff have been TUPE transferred to ANE as indicated above and in the report
<b>Property</b>	ANE are now located at a site in North Tyneside
<b>Equalities</b> (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The work of ANE is relevant to supporting some of our most vulnerable children and offering stable placements for them for the duration of their childhood and beyond.
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	<p>A full Risk Assessment of all financial, legal, human resource and operational delivery issues was undertaken and reported to Cabinet as part of the project development.</p> <p>The governance and oversight of ANE by the constituent members has been detailed in the report and emerging risks and issues are being identified within these arrangements to ensure mitigating actions are in place</p>



	and that appropriate escalation is in place
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	
<b>Customer Consideration</b>	The work of ANE in developing and supporting adopters and children placed with them is detailed in the report
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	
<b>Wards</b>	

**Background papers:**

Previous reports to Cabinet.

**Report sign off**

	initials
Monitoring Officer/Legal	
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	
Relevant Executive Director	Cath McEvoy-Carr
Chief Executive	
Portfolio Holder(s)	

**Author and Contact Details**

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