

<b>Committee</b>	<b>Dated:</b>
Community and Children's Services Committee	08/06/2018
<b>Subject:</b> Regional Adoption Agency	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Andrew Carter, Director of Community and Children's Services	<b>For Decision</b>
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## Summary

The City of London (CoL) has very few children needing to be placed for adoption. There have not been any adoption orders made since 2012.

Given the local demographic context and the specialist skills and knowledge required to deliver a local authority-based adoption service, in 2015 the CoL commissioned Coram Capital Adoption to deliver its adoption functions – for example: the recruitment and assessment of potential adopters; ensuring that the service infrastructure for adoption is in keeping with regulatory requirements; and making sure that appropriate processes are in place, including a public-facing statement of purpose. This service management model drew the CoL into a 'regional' framework with other local authorities, Harrow and Redbridge, which were already part of the Coram Capital Adoption arrangements.

At the same time in 2015, the Government set out a requirement to improve adoption practices across the country by forming a new regional adoption agency (RAA) programme, to be in place by 2020. The Secretary of State has been invested with new legal powers to act to ensure that this deadline is met.

As a result of this requirement, the CoL, along with all other London local authorities, was part of a regional discussion to plan the development of a London-wide RAA. At the same time, the CoL was part of the project proposal to develop a separate RAA built on the foundations already established with Coram Capital Adoption, Harrow and Redbridge. This project took the title of 'Ambitious for Adoption'.

In April 2018, the Department for Education (DfE) approved the Ambitious for Adoption project proposal for a new RAA to be developed with Harrow as lead local authority, along with Coram Capital Adoption as a strategic partner, with participating local authorities including CoL, Redbridge, Slough Children's Services Trust and Bromley, the latter two authorities having joined more recently. As a result, the CoL withdrew from the London-wide RAA discussion and is seeking to continue to be part of the new RAA Ambitious for Adoption proposal. This will mean that the CoL will be part of a new RAA in place by November 2018. During this development phase, the CoL will continue to commission Coram Capital Adoption under the current contractual arrangements. These arrangements required an extension of 12 months to the current contract, agreed under a waiver that expired on 31 May 2018. This will enable the CoL to continue with the current provider during the regionalisation process.

## Recommendation

- Members are asked to approve the CoL's plan to continue to be part of the development and implementation of a new RAA, ready for implementation from November 2018. The final proposed model will be presented to Members for approval prior to the implementation date.

## Main Report

### Background

#### National Context

1. Adoption is a way of providing new families for children who cannot be brought up by their biological parents. It is a legal process in which all parental rights and responsibilities are transferred to the adoptive family. Once an adoption has been granted, it cannot be reversed. Alternative permanency options include special guardianship orders and long-term fostering.
2. Successive governments have raised concerns that children in care may experience poorer outcomes due to a low rate of adoption, as well as delays in the process. Children in care are more likely to be unemployed, to experience mental health problems, to become homeless, and to have their own children removed from them. It should be noted that children in care often arrive in care with significant issues that contribute to poor outcomes; however, a poor care experience can exacerbate rather than remedy these issues. Conversely, a well-timed and good placement match can make a significant and positive difference to the long-term outcomes of children who have difficult and damaging pre-birth and early year's experiences which lead to an adoptive placement.
3. In order to improve outcomes for children in care, the Coalition Government introduced *An Action Plan for Adoption: tackling delay*<sup>1</sup> with legislative changes to the monitoring of the adoption process through an Adoption Scorecard. This set targets for local authorities to speed up the adoption process. In many authorities, those targets have not been met and the speed of adoption remains a local, corporate, parent and central government concern.
4. The DfE paper, *Regionalising Adoption*<sup>2</sup> proposed the move to RAAs in order to:

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<sup>1</sup> An Action Plan for Adoption: tackling delay (DfE, 2012)  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/180250/action\\_plan\\_for\\_adoption.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180250/action_plan_for_adoption.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Regionalising Adoption (DfE, 2015)  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/437128/Regionalising\\_adoption.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf)

- speed up matching
  - improve adopter recruitment and adoption support
  - reduce costs
  - improve the life chances of vulnerable children.
5. The Government has reinforced their policy ambition through provisions in the Education and Adoption Bill. The DfE's ambition is for **all local authorities** to be part of a regionalised service by 2020.
  6. Through *Adoption: a vision for change*<sup>3</sup>, the DfE highlighted the need to draw on the best of both the statutory and voluntary sectors to ensure that systems are designed around the needs of children. It also reinforced the vision to ensure that the voice of children and adopters is at the heart of policy-making and service delivery.

### Local Context

7. The CoL has very few children needing to be placed for adoption. There have not been any adoption orders made since 2012, and an extremely small number of Special Guardianship Orders (less than five) made in the same time period.
8. The reason is that there are simply too few children living in the CoL who would need an adoption placement. This is reflected by the fact that the majority of children in the care of the CoL are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children for whom adoption would not be the appropriate means to secure permanency.
9. As well as placing children for adoption, local authority adoption functions also include advising, assessing and recruiting potential adopters and providing post-adoption support as required for children and adopters. There is also a duty of support for families coming into CoL who are adopters and adoptees from other areas of the country. This function is generally carried out by skilled and experienced adoption social workers from within the local authorities. In the past, this function was carried out by CoL social workers as part of their role. However, in 2015 it was agreed that the CoL's adoption functions would be commissioned, and the CoL subsequently became part of the regional arrangements known as Coram Capital Adoption. Coram Capital Adoption is an outstanding, nationally recognised leading voluntary adoption agency (VAA) which for several years has also delivered adoption services for other local authority areas under separate commissioned arrangements, including Harrow and Redbridge. The contract for Coram Capital Adoption has recently been extended under the current terms until 2019 when the new RAA will be in place.

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<sup>3</sup> Adoption: a vision for change (DfE, 2016)  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/512826/Adoption\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_30\\_March\\_2016.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/512826/Adoption_Policy_Paper_30_March_2016.pdf)

## **Current Position**

### **CoL as part of the new RAA – Ambitious for Adoption**

10. Following the publication of the DfE paper, *Regionalising Adoption* (June 2015), the department invited local authorities and VAAs to submit expressions of interest in becoming part of new regionalised arrangements.
11. An expression of interest was made by the London Borough of Harrow as lead authority with four local authorities (CoL, Redbridge, Bromley, Slough Children's Services Trust) and Coram Capital Adoption for the development of the existing commissioned and integrated distributed delivery model (known as Coram Capital Adoption) as an expanded and fully integrated RAA.
12. At the same time, the majority of other London local authorities submitted an expression of interest to establish a London-wide RAA. Given the established relationship with our commissioned partners as part of Coram Capital Ambition, the CoL did not pursue joining the London RAA development. At this time, this proposal is awaiting DfE approval to proceed.
13. Harrow is the commissioning lead for RAA development because it is the local authority in England with the longest experience in commissioned adoption services. This arrangement also builds on the established strengths of combining the different demographics and opportunities of the local authorities as evidenced in the previous contracts.
14. Together this grouping is using the RAA project title of 'Ambitious for Adoption' to reflect the objective of the RAA for excellence in practice from Day 1. It aims to secure best outcomes and best value by delivering in conjunction with an outstanding VAA, embedding early permanence and preventive as well as therapeutic adoption support to ensure timely placement of all children.
15. In April 2018 the DfE approved the plan for Ambitious for Adoption to develop the new RAA, which will work towards full implementation by April 2019 at the latest. The current plan is to have the RAA in place by November 2018.
16. A Project Governance Board, represented at Director level and chaired by Harrow's Director of Children's Services, has been formed across the authorities and has framed the intent for the RAA to apply a 'hub and spoke' operating model with a VAA delivery and strategic partner. This is based on learning from the success of the first multi-authority dispersed approach, operated for over a decade (now under the brand name of Coram Capital Adoption).
17. An Operations Group has been formed and has started developing the operational model for formation of the RAA with a shared-practice model and common systems as piloted by Harrow, CoL and Redbridge. This group, along with representatives from Bromley and Slough Children's Services Trust

are working together to generate the design and inform the specification for the new RAA.

18. The next phase will finalise the commissioning scope for the RAA. This will be conducted by the London Borough of Harrow as the lead local authority. The RAA will operate as a commissioned VAA for all services, employing all staff and functioning in a 'hub and spoke' model. The corporate parenting duty (and placement decision for children) will remain with the relevant local authority. The details are being examined by the Operations Group, but the working model is as follows.

19. The RAA will focus on excellent practice and improved outcomes for children by applying established best practice as core. This includes: systematic early permanence planning and placement; preventive as well as therapeutic adoption support, utilising evidenced programmes (approaches recognised as outstanding by Ofsted); and access to established expertise in the VAAs in the capital.

20. The hub will lead the managed service from a central London location, headed by a dedicated RAA Managing Director/Head of Service responsible for:

- sufficiency planning
- quality assurance
- inspection readiness and reporting
- panel administration
- contract supervision for fulfilment of sub-contracted/commissioned services (including peer support, inter-country adoption and birth-family support)
- operational compliance and resilience including General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
- financial administration
- employment and human resources management
- information systems and data governance.

21. The hub will deliver the following core services:

- recruitment and assessment of adopters
- dual approval of concurrent planning/fostering for adoption carers and contact delivery
- matching process and recommendation to the local authority for final decision
- delivery of pan-RAA therapeutic parenting groups and specialist therapeutic support and assessment for the Adoption Support Fund
- sub-contracting/commissioning for specialist areas/suppliers, expected to include inter-country adoption, young people's groups, adopter peer support services and birth-parent counselling.

22. The practice model and hub design has been proposed to be informed by the operational impact and outcomes for children of the pan-London working of Harrow, Redbridge, CoL and Coram Capital Adoption over the last decade, which has been evidenced as follows:

- Ofsted inspections under both the Safeguarding Single Inspection Framework (SIF) and VAA measures
- scorecard position and achievements
- diagnostic analyses conducted in new joining authorities to inform improvement
- cost–benefit analysis of established partnership working.

23. It is also informed by and built on existing practice improvement work in Slough and Bromley, which means that practice, systems and processes will all be harmonised at the point of joining.

24. This demonstrates the viability and benefit of local authorities working together across the geography of London, utilising a shared centrally located hub. It also maximises transport network accessibility by adopters and young people as well as the recruitment and engagement of staff.

## **Implications**

### Strategic

25. Given the extremely small numbers of CoL children who are subject to needing adoption as their permanency care plan, and the fact that Coram Capital Adoption is an Ofsted-judged 'outstanding' adoption services provider, this report's proposal for the new RAA aligns with our ambitions for our children and families as set out in the Children and Young People's Plan and the Corporate Plan. It is also policy compliant with the Government's aim to regionalise adoption by 2020.

### Financial

26. The CoL will continue to commission adoption support services, as it does now, through the new RAA. There is no expectation that the costs for this will be greater than the current commissioned arrangements; the cost may potentially be slightly less. Finance colleagues are working with the other local authorities to build the RAA finance model. The model of a VAA-commissioned and practice/outcomes-focused hub enables greater scope of proportionality based on the number of children. This is particularly salient to CoL, given that projections for future adoptions are significantly low.

### Legal

27. The current contract expired on 31 May 2018. An exemption/waiver to put in place a new contract (from 1 June 2018 to 31 March 2019) was approved in order to cover CoL during the procurement of the new RAA contract.

28. Procurement leads for all participating local authorities met in the CoL on 16 May 2018 and agreed the need to have a new legal entity for the RAA to procure and manage the new contract.

29. The length of the legal agreement is potentially 10 years, with break clauses at five and seven years.

### Human Resources

30. Given the unique structure and make-up of the CoL children's social care service, there is no expectation that the new RAA arrangements will have staffing implications for the CoL. Due to our size, we do not have any adoption staff employed within the CoL, and therefore will not be in a position to include CoL staff in any potential movement of staff to form the RAA.

### Proposal

31. Given that the DfE has approved the proposal for Ambitious for Adoption to develop an RAA on the basis of the model set out in this report, Members are asked to approve the CoL's ongoing engagement in this work, with a view to being part of a new constituted RAA from November 2018. The final proposed model will be presented to Members for approval prior to the implementation date.

### Conclusion

32. This report sets out the national and local context that supports the development of new RAAs across the country, replacing the previous single local authority adoption agency arrangements.

33. Since 2015, the CoL has been part of a regional arrangement with our commissioned adoption specialist provider, Coram Capital Adoption. The DfE has now approved the proposal to develop this arrangement into a new RAA, to be in place by November 2018.

### Appendices

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