

<b>Report Title</b>	Establishing a Regional Adoption Agency
<b>Meeting</b>	Children, Young People and Families Oversight and Scrutiny
<b>Meeting Date</b>	18 April 2024
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<b>Lead Cabinet Member(s)</b>	Cllr Sue Sanderson, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills
<b>Wards Affected</b>	All
<b>Public. Part Exempt, or Fully Exempt</b>	Public
<b>Appendices (if any)</b>	Adoption England Strategy 2024-27

## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Westmorland and Furness is currently not part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) following the cessation of the arrangement with *Adopt Coast to Coast* on 31 March 2023.
- 1.2 An RAA for the local area is being developed in partnership with Cumberland Council and the support of the DfE to continue to deliver services across the geographical area of Cumbria. This enables the local area to establish an RAA of sufficient size to be effective and provide both breadth and resilience from the staff team.
- 1.3 The strategic oversight and governance of the RAA will be essential for both councils as the accountability for the services and outcomes achieved will remain with the two councils.

## 2. Recommendations

**For the reasons set out in this report, Children, Young People and Families Oversight and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:**

- 2.1 Note the requirement to be part of an RAA and the need to establish a local solution for achieving this
- 2.2 Require an update on the proposed operating model and framework for accountability ahead of the report to Cabinet in June 2024.

## 3. Information: the Rationale & Evidence for the Recommendations

- 3.1 The government report "Tackling Delay" set out the requirement for all local authorities to be part of a RAA, by April 2022. The intention was to improve timeliness of adoption by having a smaller number of agencies working with a larger pool of adopters, enabling them to match children more quickly.

3.2 These services must meet the statutory requirements set out in:

- The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (revised 2011)
- Children and Adoption Act 2006
- Adopters Charter 2011
- Regulations 2012
- Action Plan for Adoption Tackling Delay 2012
- Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2013
- The Adoption Minimum Standards 2014
- Children and Families Act 2014
- The Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) 2012

3.3 Adoption services must be registered with Ofsted, with set standards met before registration is granted; it is illegal to operate an adoption service prior to registration. Ofsted must be notified of the named Manager for Adoption Services and the named Adoption Support Service Adviser (ASSA). These specified roles are required as part of the Adoption regulations.

3.4 The national collaboration of RAAs - Adoption England – is due to publish a strategy aimed at modernising adoption so that services for children and families are improved. It will be important to take this into account when considering the development of the local RAA.

#### **4. Link to Council Plan Priorities: (People, Climate, Communities, Economy and Culture, Customers, Workforce)**

4.1 The Council Plan has determined the establishment of a Regional Adoption Agency as one of its priorities.

#### **5. Consultation Outcomes**

5.1 There is no requirement to consult on the proposals to establish an RAA; this is a decision for a Cabinet of those council's involved in the arrangements. There has been consultation with the DfE about the proposed collaboration and this approach is supported.

#### **6. Alternative Options Considered**

6.1 The creation of an RAA will provide an opportunity to review and revise the current approach to the delivery of the service which is currently operating as part of the Inter-Authority Agreement.

6.2 A range of alternatives was considered during the discussions with the DfE and the 2022 evaluation of RAAs taken into consideration. The two main models operating nationally are Local Authority Hosted or De-Centralised models; currently *Cumbria Adoption* delivers the required services on behalf of both local authorities with Cumberland Council the host through an Inter-Authority Agreement.

#### **7. Reasons for the Recommendations**

7.1 Given the significant disruption following Local Government Reorganisation the most advantageous model for the local area at this time is one that builds on the arrangements set out in the Inter-Authority Agreement.

## **8. Climate and Biodiversity Implications**

8.1 None noted

## **9. Legal and Governance Implications**

9.1 A local authority must maintain an adoption service within its area. This service may be provided in conjunction with other local authorities or voluntary adoption agencies. The Department for Education has promoted the use of regional adoption agencies to deliver adoption services.

9.2 At present adoption services in Cumbria are provided on a countywide in accordance with an inter-county agreement between the two authorities. Management of the adoption service is overseen by the Joint Executive Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of the Constitution. The DfE expects that an RAA should have its own governance arrangements which should include:

- A single line of accountability for functions that sit within the RAA, reporting into robust governance arrangements; and
- A head of service with responsibility for line management, recruitment, budgets, contract management and strategic relationships, and who is accountable to the governance board for delivery of functions delegated to the RAA from the local authorities

9.3 It is envisaged that oversight of the management of the adoption service will transfer to the governance board once the RAA has been established.

## **10. Human Resources Health Wellbeing and Safety Implications**

10.1 There are no direct HR implications to be considered as part of this report.

## **11. Financial Implications**

11.1 This report highlights the need for the local authority to be part of an RAA, which is currently being developed with a view to building on the arrangements currently set out in the Inter-Authority Agreement (IAA). This is being developed in partnership with Cumberland Council and the support of the DfE.

11.2 The IAA is hosted by Cumberland Council with an agreed base annual revenue budget for 2023/24 of £2.750m. As the recipient authority, Westmorland and Furness Council contributes £1.198m towards this budget. The budget for 2024.25 is currently being finalised.

11.3 At this stage no material adverse financial implications are expected to arise as a direct result of the information contained within this report. Once the proposals are finalised it will be possible to quantify any financial implications more accurately.

## **12. Background Documents**

12.1 Adoption England Strategy 2024-27