

**Title:** Business Case - Regional Adoption Agency (Adopt North East)  
**Authorisation (sign off):**

Approval from	Comment	Date
LA Representatives on RAA Board		
Executive Board		
Section 151 Officers		

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## 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is proposed that a new Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) is created through combining the adoption services for the local authority areas of Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland and South Tyneside.

These authorities wish to build on the success of their existing services to improve performance in meeting the needs of those children who require permanence through adoption, by bringing together the best practice from each of these authorities and voluntary agencies.

It is proposed, subject to approval of the Cabinets of each authority, that the Regional Adoption Agency be known as Adopt North East.

This document describes how establishing a RAA will allow the authorities to provide a more cohesive, efficient and effective use of resources and development of practice.

In June 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) published a paper '*Regionalising Adoption*' setting out the proposals for the establishment of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). This paper gave a very clear directive to local authorities that it was the Government's expectation for all authorities to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency by 2020.

Subsequently in 2016 the Government enacted the Education and Adoption Act 2016. This Act requires local authorities to combine their adoption services in Regional Adoption Agencies. If a local authority does not combine their adoption services the Act allows for the Government to direct a local authority to combine its services with other providers.

Funding has been made available from the Department for Education (DfE) as part of a national Regional Adoption Agency Programme for local authorities and other partners, where appropriate, to develop RAA arrangements.

A Project Board, Executive Board and work streams have collaborated to produce a detailed set of RAA proposals.

Work to determine the RAA proposals has involved extensive financial analysis and has concluded with the recommendation that the provision of the RAA services be via a lead authority/hosted model. It is therefore also proposed that North Tyneside Council should act as the lead and host Local Authority.

Stakeholder consultation has been extensive and yielded intelligence and insights which have been incorporated into the planning of the RAA.

## **2 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

As explained above, the development of Regional Adoption Agency proposals is part of the national adoption agenda set out in the Department for Education (DfE) paper 'Regionalising Adoption' in June 2015. This was further developed by the Government in 'Adoption; A Vision for Change' in March 2016 and put into law with the enactment of the Education and Adoption Act 2016.

The Government has sought to address, by the above, a number of challenges in national adoption practice as follows:

- Inefficiencies in the delivery of adoption services in England
- Matching of children
- Recruitment concerns
- Adoption Support challenges

Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide adoption services to all those affected by adoption living in their area and those services are subject to regular inspection by Ofsted to ensure they meet legislative requirements and minimum standards for adoption.

The move towards the proposed Regional Adoption Agency will not remove the statutory responsibilities placed on local authorities but will have far reaching changes for how those functions are organised, managed and delivered.

While all the authorities involved with the project have and currently continue to provide high performing adoption services, the Government expects that Regional Adoption Agencies will be better able to target the recruitment of prospective adopters, speed up the matching and placement of children, improve adoption support services and may create efficiency savings.

In November 2015, Newcastle City Council submitted an Expression of Interest on behalf of itself, Northumberland County Council, North Tyneside Council and Gateshead MBC, and four voluntary adoption agencies - After Adoption, Barnardos, ARC NE and Durham Family Welfare (DFW) to the DfE in relation to the development of regional adoption agency arrangements in the North East. South Tyneside Council subsequently joined the project.

Following the approval of the Expression of Interest, a Project Board was established to drive the project forward. The Project Board is made up from the Assistant Directors of Children's Services from each of the authorities and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies of After Adoption, Barnardos, Arc Adoption and Durham Family Welfare. The Project Board is overseen by an Executive Board made up of the Directors of Children's Services from each of the Constituent Authorities. Further details of the project support arrangements are provided in Appendix 1.

## **3 PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT**

This document sets out the case for creating a new Regional Adoption Agency by combining the adoption services for the local authority areas of Gateshead, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland and South Tyneside, working in partnership with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA), After Adoption, ARC NE, Barnardos and Durham Family Welfare (DFW).

This document also describes how establishing a single adoption agency will allow in particular

the five authorities to provide a more cohesive and effective use of resources and promote the development of practice to the benefit of children, adopters and others who are affected by adoption.

This Business Case proposes a governance and operational financial model that sets out how the RAA will work with its partners to deliver adoption services.

#### **4 PROJECT WORK UNDERTAKEN**

The development of the proposals for the RAA follows substantial project work undertaken since January 2016. In particular this has involved:

- Establishing local authority and VAA project governance arrangements. This included the establishment of an RAA Project Board as well as an Executive Board (made up of the Directors of Children's Services). The Project Board has membership from Assistant Directors of Children's Services or their equivalent and VAA representative. A Project Team, comprising of a DFE sponsored coach, Project Managers and workstream leads (who have expertise in areas such as the adoption journey, finance, human resources, legal, information technology/information governance, estates/property, communications and engagement) has also been created to develop the proposals;
- Creating a baseline of the current adoption services provided by the 5 Local Authorities. This has included extensive analysis of finance, historical and current spend/income, performance and staffing; and
- Continued and ongoing stakeholder engagement and involvement. This has been a strong feature of the project and has included surveys, staff newsletters and face to face engagement events. Consultation events have been held with relevant stakeholder groups including adopters, birth parents, children and young people affected by adoption; staff; and partners in health and education. After Adoption have led on adopter and adopted children consultation. Elected members and relevant portfolio holders have also been consulted in all five local authorities and reports have been submitted to the respective Cabinets as this has been necessary.

#### **5 SCOPE AND VISION OF THE REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY**

As stated above the proposed RAA will encompass the local authority areas of Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland and South Tyneside. It is estimated that the RAA will initially place 123 children per annum. (Based on average number of children placed for adoption across the 5 Local Authorities in 2016/17 & 2017/18)

The Project Team working with the Project Board and Executive Board developed the following to encompass the vision and objectives of the RAA:

##### **RAA vision:**

Excellent adoption services that transform children's and families' lives for the better.

## **RAA objectives:**

- We place all children in a timely way in high quality, successful, life-long adoptive placements which meet all of their needs.
- Families and prospective adopters receive a high quality experience no matter where they live.
- Adoptive children and families receive the support they need for as long as they need it.
- Our skilled and dedicated staff are proud to work for the service.
- We achieve our objectives by working together in a spirit of collaboration, openness and co-production.

## **6 DELIVERY MODEL OPTIONS CONSIDERED.**

The Project Team and both the Project Board and Executive Board have considered which of the following strategic delivery options for the RAA would be appropriate. The options, which were suggested by the Department for Education (DfE), that have been considered are:

- Option 1 - A single local authority host;
- Option 2 - A Joint Venture between the local authorities in the form of a Local Authority Trading Company (JV/LATC)
- Option 3 - A Joint Venture between the local authorities and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies creating a new VAA
- Option 4 – Outsourcing service delivery to an existing Voluntary Adoption Agency

The options appraisal undertaken by the Project Team and Boards utilised the approach recommended by the DfE and has been used by other projects throughout the Regional Adoption Agency Programme. Project Board evaluated the four options against the following set of criteria:

- 1) Desirability. i.e. how well the delivery model would promote the objectives and priorities of adopters and adoptees and help meet key outcomes (feel safe, live fulfilling lives, be healthy, have a voice, reach their potential and be resilient);
- 2) Feasibility. i.e. the extent to which each option could be implemented within required timelines and budgets and allows for an appropriate level of ownership, involvement and control of the partners; and
- 3) Viability. i.e. the extent to which the model demonstrates financial and operational sustainability.

The initial Options Appraisal indicated that Options 1, 2 could be considered as possible options. The other options were not considered appropriate for the following reasons:

- Option 3: A Joint Venture between the local authorities and VAAs – essentially this was dismissed as an option for two reasons. Firstly there was no appetite within the VAA partnership to become involved in such an enterprise. Secondly, there was also significant concern expressed by local authority partners about sharing control of any such Joint

Venture entity with VAA's whilst being fully funded by the local authorities.

- Option 4: Outsourcing service delivery to an existing VAA – as above there was no appetite from VAA's to take on this role. There are in fact very few such arrangements nationally.

Financial modelling was therefore carried out on Option 1 (A single local authority host model) and Option 2 (the JV/LATC).

The initial results of the Options Appraisal exercise had indicated that Option 2 (the JV/LATC model) could potentially provide greater flexibility and in particular the ability to innovate in a business sense.

Therefore in June 2017, the Cabinets of the local authorities indicated their support in principal for the continued development of a RAA and the use of a JV/LATC model as the preferred business model to deliver the RAA. This "in principal" support was subject to an analysis of the two available options and a final decision on the model.

In March 2018, a further report to the Cabinets indicated that although initial results of the options appraisal exercise had indicated that Option 2 could potentially provide flexibility and the ability to innovate in a business sense, as the financial modeling had progressed it had become clear that the cost this model would be considerably more expensive than current arrangements in each local authority.

In June 2018, the Cabinets considered a further report on the proposals relating to the RAA. The Cabinets were advised that the financial modeling highlighted that, between the two options, the ability to recover VAT in the local authority hosted model established a clear and significant financial difference between the two options with the host model assessed as significantly more efficient in this regard.

Furthermore in relation to ease of implementation generally, the delegation of adoption functions to one local authority was more straightforward than establishing a joint venture vehicle and commissioning that vehicle to provide the required services. In addition the transfer of staff to another local authority and the provision of proper pension arrangements was simpler and cheaper than with a joint venture vehicle.

It was also noted as an advantage, in terms of the sense of ownership, if the regional adoption service was hosted by one of the local authority partners.

In considering the above, the Cabinets noted that to make the hosted model operate effectively four of the local authorities would have to delegate their adoption services functions to one host authority pursuant to Sections 9EA and 9EB of the Local Government Act 2000 and the Local Authorities (Arrangements for the Discharge of Functions) (England) Regulations 2012. The Host Authority would then deliver the adoption services on behalf the authorities. This arrangement would be supported by an appropriate legal agreement being entered into by the authorities covering such matters as the financial contributions necessary from the authorities, indemnities, sharing of budget shortfalls together with internal governance and oversight.

It was also noted that North Tyneside Council had been identified as the proposed host and lead authority for the RAA because of its readiness to undertake this role.

The June 2018 Cabinets of the authorities therefore noted:

1. that the preferred business model for the RAA was a local authority hosted model which would operate through the delegation of adoption functions to a host local authority pursuant to Sections 9EA and 9EB of the Local Government Act 2000 and the Local Authorities (Arrangements for the Discharge of Functions) (England) Regulations 2012; and
2. the proposal for North Tyneside Council to act as the Lead and Host Authority for the RAA;

The above was subject to final approval of the proposals following the receipt and analysis of a consultation exercise and the finalisation of this business case and the agreement of appropriate Heads of Terms for the Shared Services Agreement to be entered into between the authorities.

The results of the consultation process are to be reported in full to the Cabinets when the consultation process has ended, but the initial results are positive and supportive of the proposals for the RAA. Heads of Terms for the Shared Services Agreement between the authorities have been developed and are also subject to Cabinet approval.

This business case is now complete and details of the financial arrangements between the authorities that will support the RAA have been identified and are set out in this document and in the reports to be submitted to the Cabinets.

## **7 RECOMMENDATION FOR THE PROVISION OF THE REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY.**

Following a comprehensive financial analysis, the detail of which is set out later in this document, and the other findings in this business case, the RAA Executive Board recommends to the Cabinets of the authorities involved that the most effective delivery model for the RAA is the local authority hosted model and that North Tyneside Council act as the host authority with the appropriate delegation of functions.

## **8 PROPOSED GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS.**

To make the hosted model operate effectively, as explained above, it is proposed that the four other authorities delegate their adoption services functions to the Host Authority, North Tyneside Council, pursuant to Sections 9EA and 9EB of the Local Government Act 2000 and the Local Authorities (Arrangements for the Discharge of Functions) (England) Regulations 2012. Each Cabinet of the Constituent Authorities must therefore make a resolution that its Adoption Functions be delegated to North Tyneside Council. North Tyneside Council must also make a resolution to accept the delegations from the other four Constituent Councils.

The Adoption Functions to be delegated to North Tyneside Council are:

- Recruitment and Assessment of prospective adopters;
- Matching and Placement - to match prospective adopters with children in need of adoption



- Post placement and post Adoption Order support (3 year limit)
- Support and advice to all affected by adoption
- Develop and manage all forms of post adoption contact (Post Box) between adopted children and their birth families
- Step Parent Adoption
- Inter-country Adoption

The arrangements for the delivery of the RAA services by the lead and host authority will be supported by an appropriate legal agreement being entered into by the Constituent Councils. The Shared Services Agreement will cover such matters as the financial contributions necessary from the Constituent Councils, indemnities, sharing of budget shortfalls, governance and oversight and the services to be provided. The Cabinets will be requested to approve the Head of Terms that have been developed and then to grant a delegation to their Head of Legal Services, in consultation with appropriate members and officers in their authorities, to negotiate and finalise the Shared Services Agreement.

To ensure that there is effective communication and engagement between the authorities the Shared Services Agreement will provide for the creation of an Officer Liaison Group. This will be made up of the Directors of Children's Services or their nominees. This Officer Liaison Group will meet on a quarterly basis and will provide a direct formal point of contact between North Tyneside Council as the lead and host of the RAA and the other authorities. Clearly less formal lines of communication will also operate between the North Tyneside Council and the other authorities in relation to operational matters.

The Liaison Group will monitor the performance of the RAA against the relevant performance management targets.

Within the local authorities who are delegating their Adoption Functions appropriate arrangements between their Director of Children's Services and their authority's administration will be necessary to ensure that political oversight of the arrangements is maintained within each authority.

Notwithstanding the above the Shared Services Agreement will also provide for a formal dispute resolution process should issues in relation to the delivery of the RAA develop.

The RAA will have its own budget and medium term financial plan. It is anticipated that discussions in relation to the RAA's budget will begin in September of each year with a view to an agreed budget being ready for incorporation into the overall budget of North Tyneside Council when it sets its annual budget in February/March each year.

The Shared Services Agreement will also provide, should the situation arise, for the termination of the agreement and thereby termination of the delivery of the functions of the RAA by North Tyneside Council. It is proposed that where one of the Constituent Councils gives notice to terminate this will cause a termination event and will bring an end to the whole arrangement. 12 months' notice will be required by any of the Constituent Councils to terminate the shared service arrangement.

## **9 FINANCIAL ASSESSMENT**

## 9.1 Baseline Costs

The Finance workstream consisted of representatives from each of the five local authorities, who were tasked with identifying the 'baseline' cost for the adoption service for their respective authorities, and developing options for an acceptable funding model.

The Project Board commissioned an external company, Aleron, to assist the Finance Workstream in collecting the baseline financial information and activity data, and develop a proposed Business Model. It was decided that collecting actual cost, rather than budget, would be the most sensible approach to produce a true reflection of the cost of the Adoption Service for each Local Authority. Financial and activity data was collected for a four year period, 2013/14 to 2016/17, which allowed for the calculation of average costs, and identification of any one-off instances of income or expenditure which could distort the typical annual cost for a Local Authority. It also established an overall baseline cost and a number of unit costs for each authority, for comparison purposes. During this exercise, it was agreed that the following costs were 'in scope' and therefore included in the baseline cost:

- Staffing costs directly related to the adoption service
- Non-staffing/running costs
- Corporate Overheads
- Post adoption support, exclusively staffing costs and commissioned services
- Income from selling placements (inter-agency fees)

Income from selling placements will be retained by the RAA for any placements where the match is made post RAA 'go live' on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2018. Any placements matched before this time the income will be retained by the Local Authority involved.

Costs 'out of scope' and therefore not reflected in the baseline cost and assumed to be retained by individual authorities are:

- Post adoption financial support (allowances)
- Commissioned post adoption therapeutic support, that exceeds the £5k funding limit imposed by the Adoption Support Fund (ASF)
- Cost of purchased placements (inter-agency fees)

## 9.2 Business Model and Funding Options

Four funding models were proposed by the Finance workstream to the Executive Board where each LA:

1. Does not participate in an RAA, and risks paying the equivalent of the inter-agency fee per adoption by joining an RAA at a later date.
2. Takes a stepped approach, to pay current level initially with a view to move to a standard unit cost model over a three year period.
3. Pays a standardised unit cost per adoption.
4. Pays current level.

Directors of Children’s Services from each Local Authority, agreed in principal to adopt model 4, the financial model proposed seeks to ensure that each Local Authority will continue contribute the average net cost that they have paid from figures 2015/16- 2016/17. The financial modeling has attempted to ensure that no local authority is required to pay more.

Further work was then undertaken to develop the budget for a proposed North Tyneside Council hosted model, shown in Table1.

Table 1 – Draft Budget for RAA hosted by North Tyneside Council

<b>Expenditure/Income Category</b>	<b>Budget</b>
Staffing	£2,173,840
Premises, IT and Running Costs	£499,249
Support Services	£257,714
Commissioned Post Adoption Support	£150,180
<b>Gross Expenditure</b>	<b>£3,080,983</b>
Inter-agency fee income	<b>-£651,000</b>
<b>Net Budget</b>	<b>£2,429,983</b>

This followed with a series of options to establish the % contribution from each authority. These included a combination of the following:

- Allocating gross cost by
  - cost category:
    - Staffing (based on structure established by the Human Resources workstream)
    - Running Costs (3 year average)
    - Contract value for each Local Authority for commissioned Post Adoption Support
  - A total gross cost
  - net cost
- Allocating income generated from selling placements, based on a two year average of activity of selling placements
- Allocating Net cost by
  - Gross cost

- Net cost (2 year average)
- 3 year average of the number of children adopted

These options were considered by the Directors of Finance for each authority, and it was agreed that the contribution would be based on a 2 year average of net cost (2015/16 and 2016/17). Table 2 shows the net cost for each authority used as the basis to calculate the contribution, and the estimated contribution from each authority.

Table 2 – Baseline net cost, % Contribution and Value of Contribution to RAA.

<b>LA</b>	<b>2 Year Average Net Cost 2015/16 to 2016/17 (excluding purchased placements but including inter-agency income)</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Contribution To RAA</b>
Gateshead	£593,140	22	£534,596
Newcastle	£525,575	20	£485,997
North Tyneside	£384,535	15	£364,497
Northumberland	£712,963	27	£656,095
South Tyneside	£420,934	16	£388,797
<b>Total</b>	<b>£2,637,148</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>£2,429,983</b>

There are a number of assumptions to note in the proposed Finance Model, including:

- The RAA will generate income from selling 21 adopters each year and any income generated from selling these placements is retained by the RAA.
- There will be no redundancy costs.
- All set up costs (including ICT, premises, and additional staffing resource required by the host authority) will be fully funded from the DfE implementation grant held by Newcastle.

### **9.3 Agreement of Apportionment of Surplus and Deficit.**

A number of options have been considered for the distribution of any surplus or deficit:

1. Allocate any surplus or deficit in relation to the proportion of an authority's financial contribution.
2. Allocate any surplus or deficit to take into account both the proportion of an authority's financial contribution and the actual number of adoptions achieved for each authority, weighted 50% and 50% respectively.
3. Allocate any surplus based on proportion of an authority's financial contribution, and allocate

any deficit equally to each Local Authority.

It has been agreed that option 2 should be applied. This takes into account adoption activity and financial contributions.

It is suggested that a ring-fenced reserve is established from any potential surplus, the value of any contribution to a reserve to be agreed between the Chief Finance officers. This will include consideration of any future years' pressures, particularly in relation to risk areas such as achieving income from selling placements, and to develop the service moving forward. Any remaining surplus to be redistributed in accordance with the agreed mechanism.

## **10 THE OPERATING MODEL**

### **10.1 Services in scope**

The RAA will deliver the following main services across the five local authorities:

- Recruitment and Assessment of prospective adopters;
- Matching and Placement – to match prospective adopters with children in need of adoption
- Adoption Panels for approvals and matches
- Post placement and post Adoption Order support
- Support and advice to all affected by adoption
- Develop and manage all forms of post adoption contact (Post Box) between adopted children and their birth families
- Step Parent Adoption
- Inter-country Adoption
- Work in partnership with the child's social worker where the child has a plan of adoption.

In relation to the operation of the RAA at a practical level, the RAA will be led by a Senior Manager of North Tyneside Council who will act as the service head. That Senior Manager will be a member of the Senior Management Team of the Health, Education, Care and Safeguarding Service and will report directly to the Head of Health, Education, Care and Safeguarding (the Director of Adults and Childrens' Services) at North Tyneside Council.

Under the arrangements for the proposed RAA, the staff who currently deliver the adoption services in each of the authorities will all come together under the employment of North Tyneside Council pursuant to the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE). A formal consultation process with individuals and recognised Trade Unions has commenced and will continue if the proposals as set out in this report are approved.

Detail on the proposed organisation, including staffing roles and functions will be developed in due course by North Tyneside Council. The organisational structure will be designed and shaped to maximise the journey outcomes for children and prospective adopters.

### **10.2 Property and ICT.**

It is proposed that the RAA will be "headquartered" in the Pembroke Wing, Balliol Primary School, Benton.

The service provided by the RAA will cover a broad geographical area from south of the Tyne to the Scottish border. A high degree of mobile working is anticipated to make the most efficient use of staff time and accessibility for service users. It is also important that the main operational base be able to establish a visible identity for the service, offers a cost effective training venue as required and provides a degree of separation from operational children's social work staff to ensure that birth parents and adopters are not put in difficult position of using the same facilities at the same time.

The ICT provision for the RAA will involve setting up a Case Management system based on North Tyneside Council's implementation of Liquidlogic LCS, as well as putting in place the required connectivity, mobile and desktop devices, and provision of 'generic' software licensing (Microsoft Office, Outlook etc.). Liquidlogic is a dedicated social services ICT system that supports the data collection and storage of information held by North Tyneside Children's services.

A dedicated resource is being recruited by North Tyneside Council to co-ordinate the configuration of the Case Management system and the wider ICT delivery project, and to provide intensive user support in the immediate post go-live period.

### **10.3 Data and Information.**

Data and Information will be required for the day to day operation and management of the RAA. Management Information will be generated automatically from core systems such as Liquidlogic LCS where possible.

Performance Management Information will be required to be presented to the RAA management team within North Tyneside Council, Ofsted, the other local authorities, the Adoption Leadership Board, the Department for Education and other partners, should the proposals be accepted.

A transitional phase of data transfer from the local authorities' systems to the proposed RAA host authority (North Tyneside Council) of live Adopter cases will be required prior to 'go live' 1<sup>st</sup> December 2018.

Historic closed cases will not be transferred and will be retained and archived by the respective individual Authorities.

A Data Sharing Agreement is being developed to enable the RAA staff to operate effectively and lawfully, with consideration of the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018. This will be completed and approved in collaboration with respective local authority information governance lead officers and North Tyneside Council's Caldicott Guardian and then incorporated into the Shared Services Agreement before the RAA becomes operational.

### **10.4 Commissioning Arrangements**

The delivery of post adoption services to the RAA will be underpinned by a range of support functions. From a practical perspective, it is anticipated that in most instances the current Local Authority contracting organisation will extend as necessary any existing contracts to meet need.

Further work is being undertaken in relation to commissioning and post adoption support for the future of the RAA.

## 11 STRATEGIC BENEFITS

In taking the vision and objectives into account the key aim in combining services to create a single Regional Adoption Agency is to achieve better outcomes for all children and young people with adoption plans in the region.

It is anticipated that by coming together and combining adoption services into a new regional agency, with a with larger operating area, will provide benefits children and their adoptive families by giving a wider pool of adopters and children, and will also allow for the development of more effective matching and better support services.

Currently the statutory functions required of local authorities in respect of adoption are provided by each of the five local authorities within their own geographic areas. Therefore, in terms of recruiting adoptive parents all the agencies, whether local authority or voluntary, are competing with each other. There is therefore duplication of effort and associated costs with the risk that some people who are wishing to be considered as adoptive parents are confused about where and how to proceed with their enquiry.

The proposed RAA will have a single point of contact for prospective adopters, reducing the current fragmentation of services. Similarly, a single point of entry to the adoption service regionally will improve access to adoption support services for adoptive families, and also for adopted adults and birth family members, who have a statutory entitlement to receive a service.

These proposals build on feedback received from adoptive parents as part of the stakeholder consultation and some excerpts from the consultation conclusions are set out below for illustration:

*“The general consensus included that many parents felt they have received a lot of information around the issues that can be faced by adopted children and children in the care system, however there was greater need for more information with regard to how this can impact the child later in life and how parents can manage and support the child effectively.”*

*“A key message given from participants highlighted the need for greater focus on post adoption support for parents, with parents identifying that this needs to be of ‘high quality’ and ‘long term’. Parents highlighted the need for preventative post adoption support and earlier interventions rather than allowing situations to escalate and require crisis intervention,”*

*“Parents highlighted the importance and benefit of the Adoption Support Fund, however many commented that some social work teams do not know the full range of services that could be accessed via the ASF.”*

*“Parents also highlighted that the regional adoption agency should prioritise ensuring the access to services is experienced in a seamless and effective way to all adoptive children, parents and families that require support. ‘Too much bureaucracy’ was highlighted as a substantial barrier to a timely and successful adoption journey.”*

*“A vital message within the feedback received included the need for a ‘one point’ service that can be accessed by parents advising of all ranges of support available to them and how this can be accessed. In addition, parents added that*

*they felt access to services should be made a clearer process, with some commenting on their frustrations around being ‘passed from pillar to post’.*

*It was felt that a regional adoption agency should give clarity to families of the support available, with regular timely updates of information of all services that may be beneficial to them. In addition, parents felt that they should be encouraged to feel confident enough to access support as early as possible, with some suggesting that this message should be outlined throughout the initial stages and beyond.”*

It will also no longer be necessary for the five local authorities to retain their individual Adoption Panels for the purposes of approving prospective adopters and adoption matches. This will provide greater efficiency, but it should be noted that each authority will continue to have to have a designated Agency Decision Maker for considering and agreeing the plan that a child should be placed for adoption and approval of the match. It is prudent to highlight that each authority will remain responsible for adoption services and assurance to Ofsted that each is meeting their statutory requirements.

The RAA will bring the existing local expertise together in respect of what makes a successful adoption, this includes best adoption matching practice, development of meaningful and realistic support plans and best use of resources available as and when needed.

Being more focused in terms of adopter recruitment may also widen the diversity and choice of potential adoptive families for children. This will be of particular value in delivering the benefits of improved early permanence planning and matching panel practice. A whole journey model has been developed as a part of the project and is built on the “best practice” from the five local authority’s adoption services and will continue to be reviewed throughout the first year of operation as the evidence of the RAA emerges.

In summary, the benefits expected to be realised through the development of the RAA:

- Improved timescales for adopter assessments
- Higher conversion rate from enquiry to approval of prospective adopters
- Wider diversity and choice of adoptive families
- More timely matching of approved adopters
- Improved timescales for placing children with their adoptive families
- Greater adopter engagement in service planning and delivery
- More extensive and consistent core offer re therapeutic training pre placement and post placement/Adoption Order
- Improved performance measurement and management across the service

## **12 STRATEGIC RISKS**

### **12.1 Being a part of the RAA.**

Moving to a Regional Adoption Agency may lead to concerns that adoption services will no longer be in control of individual Local Authorities. The proposed RAA will be formally constituted through a Shared Services Agreement between the authorities. The Shared Services Agreement



will provide a service specification which will set out how North Tyneside council will provide the adoption service on behalf of the other 4 Local Authorities.

Major reorganisation of adoption services in the region may have an impact on service delivery to children and adoptive families in the short term. To mitigate these risks, consistent and regular staff engagement events have been facilitated. Alongside more focused meetings for practitioners in specific areas of the adopter's journey, for example, recruitment, assessment, panel practice and post adoption support.

Performance measures aligned with the revised operating model and regular monitoring arrangements will be established and monitored in accordance with the provisions within the Shared Services Agreement.

The staffing structure will include the staff in scope to TUPE into the RAA and will reflect the business requirements of the RAA and the proposed host authority. The staffing levels will be based upon the finance available to fund the shared service and will be developed considering actual demand experienced over the past three years, however because of the known difficulties in accurately predicting the numbers of children who are subject to a Placement Order there is a risk that the staffing levels may not be consistent with demand. This would be address under the terms of the Shared Services Agreement should this arise.

Consultation feedback from adopters clearly raises the importance of getting post adoption support right, from the provision of comprehensive information at an early stage to a focus on the long-term impact of support needs. The RAA will therefore endeavour to use skilled staff capacity to develop a consistent, highly responsive offer in post approval support and post placement support to improve outcomes for children. This is with a view to reducing placement breakdowns including in relation to later difficulties when adopted children reach their teenage years.

There is risk, even regionally, of not being able to recruit adopters able to meet the needs of the children waiting, leading to more interagency placements and financial viability issues. More coordinated and targeted recruitment activity by the RAA is expected to address this.

## **12.2 Not being part of the RAA.**

There is a risk to a Local Authority if it fails to join a regional adoption agency. This could include central government directing how and by whom its service would be delivered.

The development of regional adoption agencies across the country is likely to reduce the availability of adopters for any Local Authority who is not a member of an RAA. This may increase the costs of being required to purchase an adopter placement from an RAA or VAA.

Local Authorities who are not currently involved within an Regional Adoption Agency and may need to join a Regional Adoption Agency at a later date risk having to negotiate terms of membership with an already established partnership who may be less responsive to their particular needs.

## **13.0 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

Engagement with stakeholders is an integral part of the Regional Adoption Agency development. Engagement events have taken place with over 250 participants from stakeholder groups including;

- Adults affected by adoption,

- Children and young people affected by adoption
- Adopters
- Affected staff from each local authority
- VAA staff from ARC NE, DFW, AA and Barnardos,
- Partners in health
- CCG's
- Education via Virtual Heads
- The court service.

Engagement events have been held since February 2016 and continued stakeholder involvement has taken place through web based surveys, staff newsletters and face to face events.

Elected members and portfolio holders have been consulted in all five local authorities. This report follows on from previous Cabinet agreements in 2017 and in June 2018 on the development of the RAA.

Ongoing stakeholder engagement and feedback are included in plans for the implementation phase of the RAA.

## **APPENDIX 1.**

### **Key roles in the project team:**

**Project Team-** established by Newcastle City Council to develop the project plan included consultants as project managers and a project support officer funded by the DfE grant who are responsible for overseeing and managing the overall RAA project plan on behalf of the Executive Board to ensure that the desired project objectives are delivered.

Each work stream is led by North Tyneside (Proposed Host Authority) officers led by a Senior Manager in children's services who have managing individual work stream project activities and the delivery of scheduled work stream outputs in co-operation with work stream leads from each of the Local Authorities.

The work streams have been across the following areas:

- Communications
- Finance
- Human Resources
- Information Technology
- Legal
- Social work practice
- Procurement/Commissioning
- Property/Estates
- Performance Management.

# APPENDIX 2.

## 6.2 High Level Project Plan

