

Report of the RAA Joint Scrutiny Group – 30th November 2020

1. Introduction

The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Joint Scrutiny Group is an informal meeting of representative Scrutiny Members from Devon County Council, Somerset County Council, Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council and has been established to maintain a strategic overview of the activity and performance of Adopt South West, the RAA for Devon, Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay, and report any significant findings or recommendations back to individual local authority scrutiny committees.

The main focus of the RAA Joint Scrutiny Group is the monitoring of the performance of Adopt South West across the RAA area, including:

- adopter sufficiency and recruitment/retention of adopters
- adoption success/breakdown data
- adoption timescales
- sufficiency of adoption support services
- outcomes for adopted children and families

This report outlines the topics covered at the Group's first meeting on 30th November 2020, highlights the key points raised during discussion, and details any agreed actions or recommendations back to the individual local authority Scrutiny Committees.

2. Attendance

Scrutiny Members

Devon County Council: Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair) and Debo Sellis

Somerset County Council: Councillor Leigh Redman

Plymouth City Council: Councillors Terri Beer and Pauline Murphy

Torbay Council: Councillor Nick Bye

Other attendees

Councillor Frances Nicholson (Somerset County Council), Chair of the Adopt South West Strategic Partnership Board

Kath Drescher (Devon County Council), Adopt South West Service Manager

Vicky Church (Devon County Council), Scrutiny Officer

Jamie Jackson (Somerset County Council), Scrutiny Manager

3. Notes and Actions

3.1 Terms of Reference

Vicky Church, Scrutiny Officer introduced the [draft Terms of Reference for the Group](#), which was welcomed.

Members discussed the need for each of the four local authorities to continue to scrutinise adoption in their own areas at their Scrutiny Committees, but welcomed the opportunity to come together to consider the performance of Adopt South West and outcomes for families across the

RAA. Members also considered the benefits of the group meeting once every six months rather than annually.

Actions:

- (a) that the Group meet twice a year, where business requires;
- (b) that the Terms of Reference be approved, [subject to an amendment](#) reflecting (a) above.

3.2 Adopt South West Annual Report 2019/20

Councillor Frances Nicholson, Chair of the Adopt South West Strategic Partnership Board and Kath Drescher, Adopt South West Service Manager presented the [Adopt South West Annual Report](#) to the Members of the Group, which describes the Regional Adoption Agency's first full year of service. Members welcomed the report and key areas discussed included:

- **Work undertaken in the first 18 months of operation** including establishing brand identity, consolidation of staff group, consultation with adopters as key stakeholders, establishing a quality assurance framework, working closely with birth parents, supporting the development of both Adopt South West staff and colleagues in the four local authorities and delivery of the service in accordance with requirements detailed in the Inter Authority agreement;
- **Upcoming Peer Review** (7-11 December 2020) led by partners in practice Essex County Council;
- **Significant budgetary pressures**, mostly resulting from interagency fees; 77% of children are currently placed with Adopt South West adopters but other adoption agencies are used to find families for 13% of children; the only way to reduce this cost is by recruiting more adopters through Adopt South West and this continues to be a key area of focus;
- **Adopter sufficiency** which was a significant area of concern through 2019/20, but is seeing considerable improvement; this year has seen an average of nine adopters a month be approved, compared to five a month last year; there are still issues around potential adopters coming forward in Torbay, and Adopt South West are working with the local authority to understand the reasons for this and find solutions;
- **Enquiries from potential adopters** are continuing at a good steady rate; there tends to be a considerable amount of time between people thinking about adoption, to making enquiries, and then to actually applying, so there is always a delay from investment in recruitment and marketing, to seeing improvements in adopter sufficiency and adoption rates;
- **National Adoption week** October 2019 – a lot of work went into online marketing, working with local media and there was a considerable growth seen in social media engagement; following this, early 2020 saw a surge of adoption enquires;
- **Delays in court processes** as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in lower numbers of children coming through the system ready to be placed for adoption; there is an expectation that as things return to normal there will be a lot of children coming through at the same time, and so work is being done in the interim with adopters currently in the assessment stage, so that they are ready to adopt as soon as possible;
- **National adoption campaigns** this year have focussed on recruiting adopters from BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) communities, and this continues to be a priority across the Adopt South West area;
- **A range of therapeutic services** can be accessed by families through the Adoption Support Fund; of the 700 adopters who remain in touch, 30 families are currently needing significant support;

- **Looking forward to 2021** - adopter sufficiency, consistency of decision making and close working relationships with all four local authorities will continue to be key priorities;
- **Progress has been made around many of the challenges** detailed in the annual report including significant headway around the capacity of medical advisors in Somerset, and developing an effective case management system which is expected to up and running by the end of 2020; continuing to operate and adapt through the Covid-19 pandemic and recovery period is expected to continue to offer some challenges.

3.3 Future Meetings

Members discussed the usefulness of the meeting which brought together all four local authority scrutiny leads to discuss the progress and performance of the Adopt South West RAA.

Action:

- (a) That the next meeting of the group be held on Monday 19th July 2020 at 10am, chaired and hosted by Plymouth City Council;
- (b) That consideration be given to holding all future meetings 'virtually' due to the distance Members and officers may be required to travel.

Councillor Rob Hannaford
Chair of RAA Joint Scrutiny Group