

<b>MEETING:</b>	<b>CABINET</b>
<b>MEETING DATE:</b>	<b>19 SEPTEMBER 2013</b>
<b>TITLE OF REPORT:</b>	<b>WEST MERCIA ADOPTION PROJECT</b>
<b>REPORT BY:</b>	<b>ASSISTANT DIRECTOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROVIDER SERVICES</b>
<b>CABINET PORTFOLIO:</b>	<b>CHILDREN'S WELLBEING</b>

## **1. Classification**

Open

## **2. Key Decision**

This is a Key Decision because it is likely to result in the Council incurring expenditure which is, or the making of savings which are, significant having regard to the Council's budget for the service or function to which the decision relates.

NOTICE has been served in accordance with Part 3, Section 9 (Publicity in connection with key decisions) of The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012

## **3. Wards Affected**

County-wide

## **4. Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Cabinet to explore the potential of a West Mercia collaboration for the delivery of Adoption Services in Herefordshire.

## **5. Recommendation(s)**

**THAT:**

- (a) the key objectives and outcomes of the project be approved;**
- (b) the potential options for the new service be noted; and**
- (c) delegated authority be given to the Director for Children's Wellbeing to explore the opportunity to establish a shared adoption service across Herefordshire, Telford and Wrekin, Worcestershire and Shropshire**

## 6. Alternative Options

- 6.1 Herefordshire could continue to operate their own Herefordshire Council Adoption Service. The service is currently operating well and delivering good outcomes for children. Its last inspection judged the service to be good with outstanding features. However, this is a very small service with limited opportunity to make efficiency savings due to the scale of the operation. There is a need to develop more innovative approaches for hard to place children which may be more fruitfully pursued regionally.

## 7. Reasons for Recommendations

- 7.1 The overall aim of the project is to develop a single West Mercia Adoption Service which delivers a more efficient and effective service to a wider range of children. The recommendation at this stage is to agree that Herefordshire pursue this, working collaboratively to reach consensus about the best option to deliver the services across the region.

## 8. Key Considerations

- 8.1 The Government is committed to improving adoption services across the country, reducing the number of Adoption Agencies, increasing the number of adoptions and reducing delay for children in being adopted. In addition, there is a longer term proposal in the Government's 'Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' which proposes as a default position that the recruitment and training of adopters will be transferred to voluntary organisations. Whilst Adoption Services are currently strong in Herefordshire there is increasing pressure on the timeliness of Adoptions, and as with most local authorities there are challenges in Herefordshire in adopting older children and larger sibling groups, which need innovative approaches to truly tackle harder to place children.
- 8.2 Current performance in Adoption services in Herefordshire is good. Below is a 5 year comparison of activity.

Year	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13
Children for adoption	3	18	19	18	23
Children matched	8	11	9	16	14
Adopters approved	10	13	15	7	17

- 8.3 To understand the scale of the service, there are currently 26 children with a plan for adoption currently not yet placed, 18 assessments of adopters on going, and 3 approved adopters waiting for placements.
- 8.4 Comparator information is being gathered on all 4 local authorities as part of the work preparing for the outline business case. Each authority has examined the last ten cases where a child was placed with adopters (pre dating 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013 when the new processes came into effect) and the journey times from the initial enquiry to a child being placed were calculated for the adopter, and the date from a child

becoming LAC to being placed were calculated for the child.

- 8.5 This information confirms that each Local Authority has areas of strength in adoption work and areas for development. In terms of time to approve potential adopters, Herefordshire has the strongest performance at 459 days from initial enquiry to approval, compared to 561 for Worcestershire and 617 for Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin which has a shared adoption service already. However, when examining the child's journey to placement, including care proceedings and matching with adopters, Herefordshire and Worcestershire at 459 and 429 days respectively are slower than Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire at 303 days for these 10 placements. It is worth noting however, that among those 10 children placed in Herefordshire 3 children were placed with foster carers who came forward wishing to adopt the children, and the adoption approval process had to start at that point whilst the children were in placement. Therefore whilst the outcome was good for the children, it affects the timeliness figure shown here.
- 8.6 A new process has been agreed for adoptions, in place from July 1st 2013 which is provided with the background papers. Whilst it demonstrates the complexity of the process, this is a more streamlined process than the one which was in place when the above measurements were taken.
- 8.7 Of the last 10 children placed, 7 were placed with adopters approved by Herefordshire, though not all lived within the county. None of the 3 placed externally were placed within the West Midlands region as no suitable placements were identified more locally. The government agenda of 'levelling the playing field' in respect of the standardising the fees for interagency placements is to encourage agencies to find the right placement wherever it is, though it is acknowledged that distance from the placing agency does affect the level/availability of support provided from the home authority. There is potential through these proposals to expand the pool of adopters available regionally.
- 8.8 The four local authorities in the West Mercia region - Herefordshire Council, Worcestershire County Council, Telford & Wrekin Council and Shropshire Council - recognise that working collaboratively provides a genuine opportunity to respond to the national agenda and, following the success of a similar approach to establish a West Mercia Youth Offending Service, are exploring the possibility of joining forces to provide a single adoption service.
- 8.9 By delivering a single service whilst maintaining functions at a regional and local level, partners envisage achieving economies of scale and delivering a faster and more cost efficient process of providing alternative permanent homes for children across the West Mercia region. The potential to draw from a wider pool of adopters could open up for each authority, with the potential for the new service to include best practice from each of the authorities, so enhancing quality and performance of all.
- 8.10 The key objectives of the project are:
- To retain local accountability and service delivery based on local need.
  - To maintain or improve outcomes for children, young people and adopters, building on the strengths of existing services.
  - To improve efficiency through:
    - Streamlining management costs by creating a single service.
    - Streamlining service delivery via processes and pathways.

- Ensuring better value from commissioning non-core functions.
- To identify the most appropriate delivery arrangements for the single service.
- To support the establishment of the single service by September 2014.

8.11 The scope of the project is as follows:

- Explore the opportunity to establish a shared adoption service covering West Mercia.
- To look at how the four authorities might best organise recruitment and training of adopters which would be compliant with government targets over the next three or four years.
- To look at the organisation of panels in West Mercia and determine the appropriate number of these.
- To review existing post adoption support arrangements and how these might best be organised to meet future need including the level of financial support provided.
- To review existing adoption counselling and support arrangements for birth family members and how these might be developed to meet future need.
- Consider under these arrangements how particular groups are targeted and adoptive homes located e.g. older children, children with disabilities, sibling groups, BME groups.
- Explore arrangements for overseas adoption and how these might be delivered more effectively.
- To assess the feasibility of different models of working, including joint working with a voluntary adoption agency/not for profit groups or a mutual and how this might be achieved.
- To look at the relationship with the West Midlands Adoption Consortium in order to ensure that any development is complementary.
- To think about relationships between the adoption team and field work teams and the way in which children and young people needing permanent alternative homes are identified and tracked.
- To assess the impact of change on our relationships with local courts and how this would be managed.
- To consider how this body will relate to regional and national bodies.
- To look at the governance arrangements of such an organisation and how this might be managed.
- To determine options as to who might run such an organisation.
- To consider arrangements for prospective adopters wishing to consider the Fostering to Adopt scheme.
- To consider arrangements for foster carers wishing to adopt children already placed with them.

8.12 The key outcomes for the project are:

- Retained local accountability and services based on local need.
- A reduction in the length of time taken in the 'end-to-end' adoption process, ie, from initial inquiry to a child being placed.
- A reduction in the overall cost of adoption for the four authorities across a number of different budgets.
- Children waiting for adoption will be matched more quickly and placed with adoptive families sooner, particularly 'hard to place' children.
- Children's social workers will have increased choice of potential adopters to enable the successful matching of children.

- The four authorities will be assisted to meet new Government requirements on timescales.
- Swifter and more effective assessment, training, approval and support for adopters.

8.13 The project has a clear governance structure (See attached governance chart). Overseeing the project is a management board comprising the Director of Children's Services from the 4 Authorities which Director for Children's Wellbeing is a member of. The Assistant Director Children and Young People Provider Services is a member of the Steering Board, which is driving the project. There is also a working group and 6 work stream groups and Herefordshire is represented on all groups. Herefordshire is leading on Finance. The representation and commitment is good across the board and Herefordshire is a strong partner in this process. This project will contribute to the overall improvements being made in Children's Services, by delivering increasingly more effective adoption services locally, whilst benefitting from the efficiencies of scale from working regionally.

## **9. Community Impact**

9.1 At time of writing, consultations are being organised to talk to adopters about these plans. The authority wants to understand what improvements adopters and potential adopters would like to see. The kinds of benefits anticipated may be for example, more choice about the location and timing of training for adopters as there could be access to training in any of the 4 authorities. Similarly, access to more panels may speed up the approval process for some adopters. New approaches to recruit adopters for hard to place children would benefit looked after children in the county. A wider range of interventions to support adoptive families post adoption would be of immense benefit in preventing family breakdown, particularly during adolescence when issues of identity and separation are prevalent for adopted young people, which would contribute to achievement of the Herefordshire Council Corporate Plan 2013/15 priority to improve outcomes for children and young people.

## **10. Equality and Human Rights**

Section 5 of the Outline business case attached outlines the initial equality impact assessment screening.

One of the planned outcomes of this project, as set out above, is that children waiting to be adopted will be placed more quickly, and placed with adoptive families sooner, and the aim is that in particular the needs of those children who are harder to place – often older children, children with specific needs and sibling groups are placed more successfully.

## **11. Financial Implications**

11.1 The current budget for Adoption Services in Herefordshire is £747k. This budget covers the adoption team who recruit, train and assess adopters, match and support children and adoptive parents, adoption panel expenses, adoption support and adoption allowances paid to adoptive parents, support to birth parents, counselling adopted adults wishing to access their adoption records, step-parent adoptions and inter country adoptions are also undertaken by the adoption service.,

11.2 The project aims to reduce the costs of providing adoption services by up to 20% through this project. The savings for Herefordshire would amount to £149k. This is a deliberately ambitious target and will challenge all authorities to consider all the ways in which a collaborative approach will deliver this scale of saving. The two key areas of spend relate to staff costs (approximately 44%) and adopters allowances

(38% of total budget) significant reductions will be required in both budgets if a 20% reduction is to be achieved from the collaborative approach. To fully reconfigure services by March 2014 in order to deliver the savings target will be very challenging.

## **12. Legal Implications**

12.1 Given that the options listed in the Outline Business Case are very much at the formative stage it is difficult to set out the full legal implications of each, other than in very general terms. There is also the possibility that the Children and Families Bill might be further amended before being implemented. The Outline Business Case observes that depending on the option finally recommended there might be TUPE implications and the need for LAs to delegate their adoption functions to another LA or even a separate body. In the latter case it would be necessary to examine in some detail the extent to which such functions can legally be discharged other than by a LA.

## **13. Risk Management**

13.1 The key high level risks associated with this project are:

- Conflict between the project's vision/objectives and the strategic direction of each individual adoption service or authority.
- Change in leadership in any of the authorities could lead to buy-in to the project being lost.
- Lack of stakeholder support.
- Lack of resources to deliver the project effectively and within timescale.
- Ability to resolve complex issues such as IT within timescale.
- Loss of key quality staff through the change process.
- Under the Children and Families Bill, the Secretary of State will have the power to direct Local Authorities to arrange for the recruitment, assessment and approval of prospective adopters to be carried out by one or more other adoption agencies
- Target savings may not be achievable across the board

13.2 For Herefordshire the key risks are:

- That the good quality service in place now will be diminished by the changes
- That the local delivery of aspects of the service will be lost
- That we are the smallest of the Local Authorities so may be perceived or treated as a more junior partner in all of this
- That Herefordshire loses key post holders through the change process that will follow.

13.3 These risks will be mitigated by strong leadership within all 4 local authorities and commitment to ensuring that the service will be as good as, if not better than current provision whilst delivering the efficiency savings. The project fully considers the position of each local authority and given that Herefordshire's performance in adoption is as strong or stronger than all the partners, there is a great deal to bring to the table. There is good communication and consultation going on with the services locally and arrangements are already in hand to hold regional events with staff to explore the best route forward. The project is being well managed, and there is no pre-conceived solution – there is a genuine will to work through the issues and reach a shared decision about what is the best route forward that will deliver as good or improved outcomes and deliver the efficiencies.

## **14. Consultees**

14.1 Thus far:

- Lead Member for Children's Services
- Council Management Board
- Adoption Team
- Children's Social Care teams
- Adoptive parents and prospective adopters

## **15. Appendices**

15.1 Appendix 1 – Governance Chart

Appendix 2 – Draft Outline Business Case

Appendix 3 – Adoption Process

## **16. Background Papers**

16.1 None identified.