# CHILDREN AND LEARNING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE
## 13 February 2020

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| **Subject Heading:** | Adopt London East Update Report |
| **SLT Lead:** | Robert South |
| **Report Author and contact details:** | Sue May; Head of Service Adopt London East. Sue.may@havering.gov.uk |
| **Policy context:** | This report provides background and update on the work of Havering hosted Adopt London East |
| **Financial summary:** | The service is financially self-sufficient and funded through joint arrangements with each partner Local Authority. There are no direct financial implications for consideration within this report |

**The subject matter of this report deals with the following Council Objectives**

| | |
|---|---|
| Communities making Havering | x |
| Places making Havering | [] |
| Opportunities making Havering | x |
| Connections making Havering | x |

**SUMMARY**

Adopt London East has been formed in response to a 2015 government directive to all Local Authorities to streamline adoption services through the development of regional arrangements by 2020. Adopt London East is a regional adoption agency, hosted by Havering; providing adoption services for Havering, Tower Hamlets, Newham and Barking and Dagenham. The agency works in close collaboration

with Adopt London North, South and West. Together these agencies provide services for 22 London Local Authorities. The majority of the remaining London Authorities joined a regional agency hosted by Coram BAAF

This report provides a summary of the development and functions of the agency and contains a brief progress report since the service become operational on 1st October 2019

Transitions into regional arrangements are complex and a down turn in performance in partner Local Authorities was noted in Quarter 1 and 2 of 2019/20 immediately prior to service go-live. This reflects the experience of most operational regional adoption agencies. Evaluation of regional agencies following one year of operational activity typically evidences improved performance following an initial decline.

Statistical returns measure long-term trends but Adopt London East in-house statistical records provide clear evidence of early improvements in performance and activity since go-live.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sub-Committee is recommended to receive and note the report.

## REPORT DETAIL

### 1. Background Information

The Department for Education (DfE) paper, Regionalising Adoption proposed the move to Regional Adoption Agencies [RAA] in order to:

- Speed up matching.
- Improve adopter recruitment and adoption support.
- Reduce costs.
- Improve the life chances of vulnerable children.

All Local Authorities must join a Regional Adoption Agency by April 2020.

Feedback from Regional Adoption Agencies in operation for a year or more is positive. Adopters report on improved services and staff on improved job satisfaction. Ofsted reports on Local Authorities with adoption services delivered regionally have been universally positive.

In London 22 Local Authorities have chosen to join four Local Authority led spoke Regional Adoption Agencies, Adopt London North, South, East and West. The four

spoke agencies will work together to develop further economies through carrying out some functions in a central hub where more efficient or economical to do so. Some Local Authorities (including Waltham Forest and Redbridge in the East) have chosen to join a Coram led model. The East London RAA is hosted by Havering and comprises of Havering, Tower Hamlets, Barking and Dagenham and Newham. Decision-making is through a Partnership Board of Directors of all participating Local Authorities.

All legal agreements have been subject to scrutiny by legal and governance leads in each Local Authority. Expert advice has been taken where necessary.

The partnership agreement includes
- Budget setting and monitoring
- Staffing
- Data sharing and GDPR
- Contracting and commissioning
- Dispute resolution
- Renewal and termination of the agreement
- Insurance and limitations to liability
- Governance

The detailed partnership agreement was signed by each Local Authority DCS prior to service go-live under powers delegated following Cabinet approval for the Adopt London East Business case.

Adopt London East went live on 1st October 2019.


## 2. Outcomes

Adopt London East is committed to improving outcomes for children for whom the plan is adoption through:
- Increase in the percentage of children adopted from care
- Improved timescales for placing children with adoptive families
- Fewer adoption placement disruptions
- More children placed in an early permanence placement
- Reduction in the number of children for whom the permanence plan has changed from adoption
- Improved timescales for adopter assessments
- Higher conversion rate from enquiry to approval
- Fewer prospective adopter approvals rescinded
- More timely matching of approved adopters

### 3. Scope of service

Adopt London East has responsibility for all adoption led services:
- Recruitment and assessment of adopters.
- Family finding and matching
- Adoption support.

Responsibility for the child remains with the Local Authority. The Local Authority will therefore remain responsible for the child's progress through the court system and for final decisions in respect of care and adoption planning.

Adopt London East has a responsibility for support to Local Authority social workers including dissemination of information on regulation and best practice

### 4. Design Principles
The Board has agreed the following design principles
- Local delivery - Responsive to the needs of the community
- Close relationships with children's social workers
- Economies of scale
- Cross local authority working
- Innovation and service improvement
- Evolving service design – one size may not fit all
- Provide value for money
- Service informed through the voice of adoptive families

### 5. Adopter Voice
Adopters in East London contribute to service development through an Adopter Advisory Board, chaired by an adopter and supported by Adoption UK. Key themes from the work to date include the importance of:
- A supportive social worker at all stages of the process
- Continuity of service delivery both pre and post adoption
- Early intervention and support from a known person
- Peer networks and safe places for adopters and adopted children to meet
- Support with family contact
- Schools informed about attachment and use their pupil premium well.
- Responsive and understanding health services
- All services working together well. A 'one stop shop' for service delivery

## 6. Service Delivery

The central head office is in Havering but staff also have a local base in each Local Authority. In this way we aim to ensure that the existing close working and supportive relationships with children's social work staff and partner agencies remain absolutely central to our practice. All adoption records are held on the new Havering Liquidlogic system, we also have agreements in place that locally based adoption staff will continue to be able to access LA systems.

Although services will be delivered locally we will also be able to work together to develop a more responsive service. This will help us to recruit more adopters to meet our children's identified needs and to provide better support through a core offer delivered by the adoption support workers in partnership with local agencies

Panel functions are currently retained in each Local Authority. One central ALE panel will be developed in phase 2 of go-live, we expect to be able to operate in-house panels by the end of February 2020. This panel may meet in a number of locations and will have a large central list but one chair. The panel will meet approximately every 2 weeks in order to support timeliness. The panel will make recommendations in respect of both adopter approval and child matches. Decisions in respect of child matches will continue to be made by the Agency Decision Maker in the LA with responsibility for the child.

## 7. Progress report

7.1 <u>Service transition</u>

Transition from four Local Authority teams to one integrated service is complex and challenges have been felt in respect of pre-transition performance; service staffing; casefile information transition and demand for adoption support services. Substantial progress has been made in all areas.

In common with most regional adoption agencies, the performance of adoption services in East London Local Authorities was affected by the transition to a regional adoption agency. Some workers chose to leave adoption services and were not replaced and an interim decline in timeliness of both adopter approval and placement of children will be noted in all Local Authorities in Quarters one and two of 2019/20. Since service go-live on 1st October 2019 performance in all service areas has improved. Early performance indicators are considered later in this report.

Only one team manager joined Adopt London East and the service was able to recruit three further team managers from within the service. This has provided continuity and a positive lead from adoption experienced managers but compounded staffing losses through the transition period. Currently the service has 15 Permanent staff in place and 3 interim social workers. Recent recruitment has filled three posts previously held by interim social workers who interviewed for and accepted permanent positions.

Transition of case file information was subject to review within General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). A detailed protocol is included within the Partnership Agreement. Approximately 150 Full case files and 1,000 letterbox contact files have been manually downloaded and uploaded onto the Adopt London East ICS system.

All new regional adoption agencies have noted increased demand for adoption support services due to the increasing complexity of adopted children's needs, publicity about service provision and Local Authority held waiting lists for adoption support. Adopt London East has faced the same pressures. All families requiring adoption support have been subject to initial assessment and prioritisation of need an initial offer has now been made to all families.

7.2 Performance

The quarterly Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) report for all Local Authorities has been analysed to provide a service baseline. Performance has declined in all Local Authorities in the 6 months prior to Adopt London East go-live. Decline in performance is linked to a number of factors including: adoption service staff leaving; higher levels of sickness absence; caseload transitions and a delay in operational go-live. **See Appendix 1**

Adoption performance is measured over one and three year cycles and improvements therefore take time to be fully captured in the data returns. Early indicators are however monitored closely within the service.

Performance in respect of child matches had improved considerably. Adopter approvals are predicted to decline further in Q3 and 4 due to the decline in adopters in early stages of approval. Early stage applications have though increased from month to month and improvements are predicted for 2020/21

| Target | Previous full year | 2019/20 Q1 and 2 All | 2019/20 Q3 and 4 predicted All |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adopter approved | 42 | 17 | 12 |
| Child placed | 57 | 11 | 24 |
| Adopter support | Not available | 60 support 14 contact 600 letterbox | 112 support 50 contact 1000+ letterbox |

Demand for adoption services can fluctuate considerably from year to year. The service business case was based on an assumption of an overall steady demand in all service areas with some capacity to respond to additional demand.

Demand for adoption support services has increased considerably as has the number of children requiring a placement. In the last reporting year, a total of 57 children were placed. It is likely that less children will be placed this year due to the slowdown in quarters one and two but a total of 167 children are currently receiving a family finding service.

Demand for adoption support has shown a similar increase as indicated above. Improved support for our families will improve outcomes for our adoptive children and families.

Increases in demand will be monitored closely by the Board. Savings made from an increase in the number of adopters available to accept a placement may be re-invested into service improvement to ensure the service is able to meet identified increased demands.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

**Financial implications and risks:**

The service budget was approved by Havering Cabinet on 16th January 2019. The full budget and individual partner contributions were subsequently approved by all partner cabinets.

The partnership agreement signed by all Local Authorities includes the mechanism for annual and in-year review of the budget.

Review of the budget is undertaken on a quarterly basis through the partnership board and annually within the annual general meeting.

There are currently no identified risks in respect of this budget

**Legal implications and risks:**


There are no apparent legal implications in noting the content of the Report.

**Human Resources implications and risks:**

The recommendations made in this report do not give rise to any identifiable HR risks or implications that would affect either the Council or its workforce.

A full consultation exercise was undertaken under TUPE regulations between May 2019 and July 2019. All adoption staff eligible to transfer under TUPE regulations successfully transferred on 1st October.

Informal consultations with staff have continued and all minor teething problems (for example ICT issues) have been resolved in cooperation. Periodic meetings are held with TU representatives whenever requested.

No outstanding issues have been identified

**Equalities implications and risks:**

An Equalities and Health impact assessment was undertaken prior to the presentation of the Cabinet report as presented on 16th January 2019. This considered all equality dimensions. As Adopt London East has been developed to improve the service offered to our adoptive families and widen opportunities to adopt: the assessment was largely positive. Where any potential issues were identified measures were put in place.

The primary potential issue was in respect of distance from service delivery, which may impact on adoptive families less able to travel through differing ability, childcare or financial issues. This was resolved through an ongoing commitment to local delivery of services.

**See Appendix 2**