

Report to Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

9 September 2024

Subject:	Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2023/2024
Director:	Director of Children and Education, Sally Giles
Contact Officer:	Sally Giles, Director of Children and Education sally_giles@sandwell.gov.uk Mandip S. Chahal, Interim Assistant Director for Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement Mandip1_chahal@sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That, the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receives the Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2023/24;
- 1.2 Considers the performance of the fifth year of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) and provides summary feedback to the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 At its meeting on 7 January 2019 it was agreed that the performance of the new arrangement for Adoption@Heart, the Regional Adoption Agency would be reported to and scrutinised by the Children's Services and Education Corporate Parenting Board.
- 2.2 Adoption@Heart has been operational since 1 April 2019 and a performance report was presented to the Scrutiny Board in November 2020 covering the first year of operation, further reports have been provided annually.
- 2.3 The fifth full year of performance is now set out in Adoption@Heart's Annual Report 2023/24.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

Growing Up in Sandwell	<p>Ensuring that children have the Best Start in Life is a key driver for Adoption@Heart; ensuring that children are safeguarded, protected and, when unable to live with their parents, are effectively cared for.</p> <p>High quality adoption services improve the life chances of vulnerable children and young people and ensure that all children are offered an equality of opportunity in the way that they are matched with an adoptive family. Adoption offers children a new start in life.</p>
------------------------	--

4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 The provision of an adoption service is a statutory requirement and the council is required to monitor the provision of adoption services. The government agreed that all local authorities (LAs) would be expected to deliver their adoption services through a RAA by 2020 and funding was provided by the Department for Education (DfE) to cover the costs of setting up these new arrangements.
- 4.2 On 12th December 2018, Sandwell Council's Cabinet gave approval to transfer adoption services to the new Regional Adoption Agency: Adoption@Heart. These arrangements were considered by the Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 7th January 2019 when it was also agreed that the Scrutiny Committee would undertake the role to scrutinise these arrangements and report its findings to the Corporate Parenting Board, which is chaired by the Lead Member for Children and Education.
- 4.3 The RAA for the Black Country local authorities is called Adoption@Heart. The arrangement is a 'hosted' model, whereby the adoption service is hosted by Wolverhampton City Council on behalf of the four Black County local authorities and commissioned on their behalf via Dudley Council. Contractual arrangements are in place for all partners. The adoption service has an operational interface with each local authority children's service; in Sandwell, this is Sandwell Children's Trust.

4.4 Adoption@Heart has now been operating for just over 5 years. Across the first five years of operation, Sandwell has accounted for approximately 27% of the adoptions that have taken place.

4.5 The number of children adopted in the 12-month period 2023/24 has fallen compared with previous year's performance. 17 Sandwell Children were adopted in 2023/24 compared to 34 in 2022/23. The overall number of adoptions across Adoption@Heart has fallen compared to 2022/23, from 103 to 70 in 2023/24.

4.6 There has been an increase in the number of adopters approved in 2023/24, with performance this year at it's highest for the last 3 years and second highest level since the inception of A@H.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 The provision of an adoption service is a statutory requirement and the council is required to monitor the provision of adoption services. The government agreed that all local authorities (LAs) would be expected to deliver their adoption services through a RAA by 2020.

6 Implications

Resources:	<p>At the inception of the Regional Adoption Agency, the financial contributions were based on the budgets already in existence in the four individual local authorities.</p> <p>The contribution levels for each partner is based on an agreed formula and varies annually based on level of service provision. Sandwell's budget contribution for 2023/24 was set at £1.393m, this was an increase of £25k on 2022/23.</p> <p>There was an underspend in 2022/23 this was set against the 2023/24 contribution meaning Sandwell's actual contribution for 2023/24 was £1.329m.</p>
Legal and Governance:	<p>A contract is in place between the four Black Country local authorities to commission Adoption@Heart, and the organisation is hosted by Wolverhampton Council. A Strategic Commissioning Board meets on a quarterly basis to monitor the contract. The commissioning process is</p>

	<p>managed via Dudley Council. The Strategic Commissioning Board is chaired by Dudley Council.</p> <p>An Operational Board meets monthly to ensure high quality oversight of the operational business. A further meeting is also in place to ensure the successful interface between Adoption@Heart business and the social care practice in each local authority/Trust.</p> <p>Annual scrutiny and assurance is provided in Sandwell via the Children’s Services and Education Scrutiny Board, which then makes its comments available to the Corporate Parenting Board. In Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton, the scrutiny and assurance process takes place within the Corporate Parenting Board meeting.</p>
Risk:	The corporate risk management strategy has been complied with and has concluded that there are no significant risks that require reporting and that suitable measures are in place to mitigate the risks identified to acceptable levels. The risks associated with the RAA are included in the directorate risk register.
Equality:	An Equality Impact Assessment screening is not required for this report. However, Adoption@Heart undertakes its own equality impact assessments. Ensuring that diversity and equality has a prominent focus is a key feature of the RAAs work.
Health and Wellbeing:	There are no specific health and wellbeing issues in respect of this report.
Social Value	Adoption@Heart supports children to achieve, feel safe, be supported and access opportunities. Adoption@Heart supports community resilience through the recruitment of local residents as adopters.
Corporate Parenting	Adoption@Heart supports the delivery of the Council’s corporate parenting responsibilities in identifying adopters for children where it has been agreed that would be the best outcome for them.

7. Appendices

Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2023/24

8. Background Papers

N/A