



Children's Trust Joint Committee

A meeting of the Children's Trust Joint Committee will be held at the North Northamptonshire Council, Cedar Drive, Thrapston, NN14 4LZ on Wednesday 22 September 2021 at 2.00 pm

Agenda

1.	Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members
2.	Minutes (Pages 5 - 8) To confirm the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 rd June 2021.
3.	Notification of requests to address the meeting
4.	Declarations of Interest Members are asked to declare any interest and the nature of that interest which they may have in any of the items under consideration at this meeting.
5.	Approval of NCT joining a Regional Adoption Agency (Pages 9 - 14)
6.	Urgent Business The Chairman to advise whether they have agreed to any items of urgent business being admitted to the agenda.
7.	Exclusion of Press and Public None notified.

Catherine Whitehead
Proper Officer
14 September 2021

Children's Trust Joint Committee Members:

Councillor Fiona Baker
Councillor Jonathan Nunn

Councillor Matt Golby

Information about this Agenda

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence and the appointment of substitute Members should be notified to democraticservices@westnorthants.gov.uk prior to the start of the meeting.

Declarations of Interest

Members are asked to declare interests at item 2 on the agenda or if arriving after the start of the meeting, at the start of the relevant agenda item

Local Government and Finance Act 1992 – Budget Setting, Contracts & Supplementary Estimates

Members are reminded that any member who is two months in arrears with Council Tax must declare that fact and may speak but not vote on any decision which involves budget setting, extending or agreeing contracts or incurring expenditure not provided for in the agreed budget for a given year and could affect calculations on the level of Council Tax.

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Queries Regarding this Agenda

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Or by writing to:

West Northamptonshire Council
One Angel Square
Angel Street
Northampton
NN1 1ED

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Children’s Trust Joint Committee

Wednesday 23rd June 2021

At 2:00 pm in The Maybin/Sunflower Room, One Angel Square, Northampton

Members in Attendance:

Councillor Lloyd Bunday	North Northamptonshire Council (NNC)
Councillor Andre Gonzalez de Savage (substitute for Councillor Fiona Baker)	West Northamptonshire Council (WNC)
Councillor Jonathan Nunn	West Northamptonshire Council (WNC)
Councillor Jason Smithers	North Northamptonshire Council (NNC)

Officers in Attendance:

Rob Bridge	Chief Executive NNC
Anna Earnshaw	Chief Executive WNC
Janice Gotts	Executive Director of Finance NNC
Martin Henry	Executive Director of Finance WNC
Cathi Hadley	Director of Children’s Services NNC/WNC
Adele Wylie	Director of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer NNC
Sarah Phipps	Assistant Director of Commissioning and Partnerships NNC
Rory Seymour	Commissioning Manager NNC
Jenny Daniels	Democratic Services NNC
Raj Sohal	Democratic Services NNC

01. Election of Joint Chairs

Councillor Jason Smithers nominated Councillor Scott Edwards from the North and Councillor Fiona Baker from the West. Each authority would host alternative meetings.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) Councillors Fiona Baker (WNC) and Scott Edwards (NNC) would jointly chair the meetings with each authority hosting alternative meetings.

02. Appointment of Deputy Chairs

It was pointed out that the terms of reference stated that in the absence of a Chair the Chair would be elected from those at the meeting. There was therefore no need to appoint deputy chairs.

For this meeting, Councillor Jason Smithers nominated Councillor Jonathan Nunn as Chair. This was seconded by Councillor Andre Gonzalez de Savage.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) It was noted that as stated in the terms of reference in the absence of a Chair one would be elected from among those members at the meeting; and
- (ii) Councillor Jonathan Nunn was elected as Chair for the meeting.

03. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Fiona Baker, Scott Edwards and Matt Golby.

04. Declarations of Interests

Members were requested to declare whether they had any personal or pecuniary interest in any item to be considered by the meeting. No declarations of interest were made.

05. Terms of Reference for the Children's Trust Joint Committee

At the Chairman's invitation Adele Wylie (Director of Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer for North Northamptonshire Council), introduced this item (copies of which had been previously circulated). Ms Wylie stated that they had been approved by both the North and West Councils during the shadow authority period. They had been included in the Constitution of both councils.

Councillor Lloyd Bunday stated that under Cancellation of Meetings it referred to 3 Co-Chairs. The Director of Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer stated she would seek to have that amended.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) The Children's Trust Joint Committee noted its Terms of Reference.

06. Overview of the Contractual Relationship with Northamptonshire Children's Trust

At the Chairman's invitation Cathi Hadley (Director of Children's Services), introduced this item (copies of which had been previously circulated).

Queries on the report included:

- Some of the Key Performance Indicators were included but a further report could be provided so that it fully understood what constituted poor performance and a lack of improvement and poor financial management.
- The report would also include the timelines. The operational group and strategic groups both met monthly and there were a number of things to report to them on so details of these would be included in the report.
- It was understood that the Committee was more concerned with management between the two councils, but they wished to understand fully what was monitored by the two strategic groups.
- There was a structure in place for management of the contract and holding the trust to account which was undertaken within the commissioning group, and councillors Edwards and Baker would be managing it with the commissioning managers.
- Performance of the trust could be affected by its dependency on the two councils. E.g., if West Northants provided a service the trust relied on, but it couldn't be referred to this group.

- The Strategic Group met quarterly but meetings could be arranged more frequently if required.
- The trust could attend 3 democratic meetings a year of each Council.
- Both Councils would be reporting performance of the trust in their reports so councillors would receive information on how the trust was performing. Councillor Scott and the Director of Children's Services would be on hand to answer any queries that arose from the reports.
- It was noted that whilst scrutiny was an excellent process it could sometimes take its time to understand an issue. Both Councils were determined the trust succeeded

RESOLVED that:

- (i) the Children's Trust Joint Committee noted the contractual relationship with Northamptonshire Children's Trust and would receive a further report to clarify role of the commissioning group, strategic group, and the Children's Trust Joint Committee.

07. Schedule of Meetings

At the Chair's invitation, Ms. Adele Wylie introduced the report (copies of which had been previously circulated). These were approved.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) The Joint Committee approved the schedule of meetings.

08. Urgent Items

There were no urgent items on this occasion.

09. Exempt Items

There were no exempt items on this occasion.

10. Close of Meeting

The meeting closed at 2:27 pm.

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Item no: 5

Children's Trust Joint Committee 22 September 2021

Report Title	Approval of NCT Joining a Regional Adoption Agency	
Report Authors	Olivia Ives, Assistant Director – Corporate Parenting, Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) Rory Seymour, Commissioning Manager, North Northamptonshire Council	
Contributors/Checkers/Approvers		
North MO	Adele Wylie	
North S151	Janice Gotts	
Other Director/SME	Tony Challinor	

List of Appendices

None

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To seek approval from the Children's Trust Joint Committee for Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) to join the Family Adoption Links Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The report sets out the proposals for North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) arrangements in accordance with the requirements set by the Department for Education (DfE).
- 2.2 Every Local Authority is required to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). The arrangements were required to be in place by the end of 2020, a short term dispensation was granted to Northamptonshire due to Local Government Reorganisation. However, there is very close monitoring by DfE and their expectation is that Northamptonshire will be operationally active within an RAA in the autumn.
- 2.3 NCT deliver Adoption services on behalf of North and West Northamptonshire Councils and will join the RAA. It is proposed that NCT joins the Family Adoption Links (existing members are Leicestershire, Rutland, Lincolnshire,

North Lincolnshire and Leicester City) RAA. This is because it is the RAA most closely geographically aligned with Northamptonshire and it is anticipated the RAA's model of service delivery will deliver benefits to NCT and the families they serve. Family Adoption Links covers large geographical area and will improve access for potential adoptive parents of looked after children in Northamptonshire.

3. Recommendations

3.1 It is recommended that the Children's Trust Joint Committee:

- a) Approve Northamptonshire Children's Trust proposal to join the Family Adoption Links Regional Adoption Agency

3.2 Reason for Recommendations:

- It is a Department for Education expectation that all LAs join a Regional Adoption Agency, Northamptonshire has been given short term dispensation due to Local Government Reorganisation but is expected to be part of an RAA by Autumn 2021
- Under its Articles of Association, NCT must seek approval from the councils as joint owners of the company before joining any legal entity or undertaking in which NCT would be a member, shareholder or hold any analogous position
- NCT has undertaken a rigorous options appraisal of the RAAs that border Northamptonshire and established that Family Adoptions Links was the best option due to its geographical proximity and the benefits of their particular model of RAA

4. Report Background

Regional Adoption Agencies

- 4.1 In June 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) published 'Regionalising adoption' which detailed its proposals to move to Regional Adoption Agencies. Their aim was for all local authorities to join larger regional groups of local authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) to radically redesign the adoption system in their areas and to provide excellent adoption services with a strong focus on innovation and practice. The move to RAA arrangements is underpinned by the Children and Families Act 2014 and the more recent publication 'Putting Children First: delivering our vision for excellent children's social care' published in July 2016.
- 4.2 A further publication, 'Adoption: A vision for change', set out the DfE expectation that LAs become part of a RAA by 2020 and, under the Education and Adoption Act 2016, the Secretary of State for Education now has the power to direct an LA to be part of an RAA. Joining an RAA is a requirement placed on Local Authorities by the Department for Education (DfE).
- 4.3 Due to Local Government Reorganisation, Northamptonshire was given short-term dispensation from joining an RAA by the end of 2020 deadline. However, there is very close monitoring by DfE and their expectation is that

Northamptonshire will be operationally active within an RAA in the autumn of 2021.

Approval by the Unitary Councils

- 4.4 Northamptonshire Children's Trust is an operationally independent company that delivers children's social care services – including Adoption – on behalf of North and West Northamptonshire Councils. However, under its Articles of Association there are certain reserved matters that require the councils' approval as the joint owners of the company.
- 4.5 This includes 'any proposal by the Company (*Northamptonshire Children's Trust*) to form any legal entity or undertaking in which the Company would be a member, shareholder or hold any analogous position in any jurisdiction or acquiring shares in any other company.' This means that before joining an RAA, NCT must seek the prior written approval of the councils.
- 4.6 This has been discussed and approved through the contract management process at the monthly Operational Commissioning Group meeting and the Children's Trust Joint Officer Board and is now being passed to the Children's Trust Joint Committee for formal approval by the councils.

5. Issues and Choices

- 5.1 The options available to NCT in choosing which RAA to join are limited, and it is a decision of the RAA whether to 'accept' NCT. There are 4 Neighbouring RAA arrangements:
- Family Adoption Links (Leicestershire, Rutland, Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and Leicester City)
 - Adopt East (Bedford Borough, Hertfordshire, Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, Southend, Thurrock and Luton)
 - Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Regional Adoption Agency
 - Milton Keynes and Central Bedfordshire Regional Adoption Agency
- 5.2 It is proposed that NCT joins Adoption Family Links, this RAA has been proposed for the following reasons:
- All existing RAA members are in the East Midlands region which means the arrangements benefit from geographical proximity
 - There are existing East Midlands partnerships and established professional links in relation to adoption in which NCT, NNC and WNC already participate
 - This model enables the NCT Adoption Service to continue to function as a voluntary adoption agency with staff remaining in the employment of NCT
 - The model offered by Adoption Family Links facilitates sharing of best practice and learning and development, pooling of some resources (i.e. marketing activity and recruitment of adopters) whilst enabling NCT to retain control of key service areas (family finding and assessment of adopters)
 - Ensuring smooth and timely journeys to permanence for children who have a plan of adoption is a priority area for NCT. To achieve this requires close working relationships between the children's social work teams and the adoption service. The model of RAA provided by Adoption Family Links

facilitates this continued co-working through localised adoption services within the RAA

- Lincolnshire are the DfE appointed 'partner in practice' and are supporting service improvements in several areas

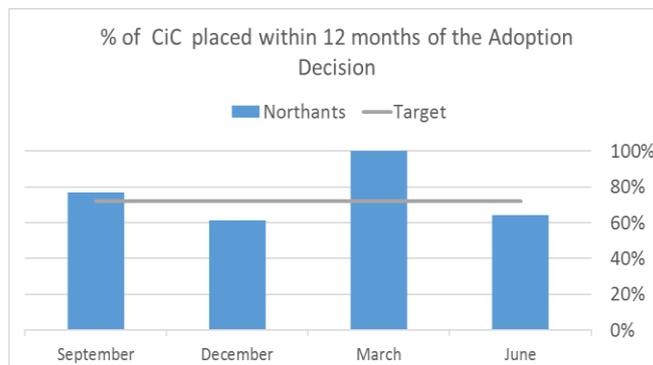
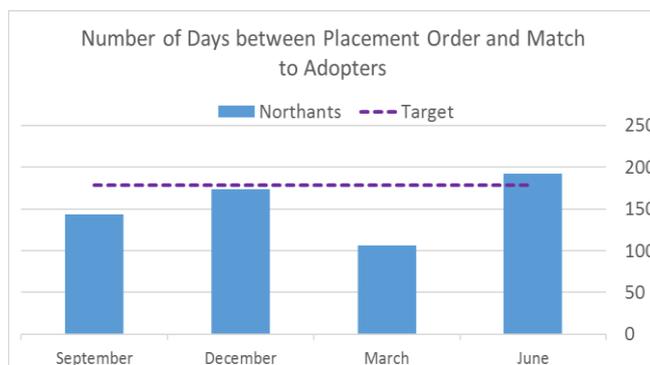
5.3 The proposed RAA arrangement has a governance board where NNC / WNC / NCT will be represented by the NCT Director of Social Care who will report back where required through the Operational Commissioning Group chaired by the Director of Children's Services.

Anticipated benefits

5.4 Every local authority with children's social care responsibilities produces an Adoption Scorecard which measures the following indicators;

- The number of days between placement order and match to adopters
- The percentage of children in care placed within 12 months of an adoption decision

5.5 The performance in Northamptonshire can be seen in the graphs below. It is anticipated a successful RAA arrangement will improve outcomes for children who have a plan of adoption. The below graphs show that performance within NCT is currently variable and is influenced by a number of factors including the age of the child, whether they have any additional needs, their ethnicity and whether they are part of a sibling group.



5.6 A DfE evaluation of live RAAs has shown statistically significant reductions in the time to placement for all children and even more so for 'harder to place' children (5 or more years old, ethnic minority, sibling group). The evaluation showed a reduction in the average time it takes to place a child (from placement order to being placed with an adoptive family) from eight months in non-live RAAs to seven months in live RAAs. The evaluation of live RAAs also found that reductions in time taken from placement order to a child being placed with an adoptive family estimated large savings in LA foster care costs.

5.7 In June 2021, NCT had 13 children with a placement order who were waiting for adoptive families to be identified for them. Once within and RAA children are likely to be placed for adoption quicker which would reduce this number, improve outcomes for the child through a permanent placement.

- 5.8 Another potential benefit is a reduced reliance on interagency placements with established RAAs reporting that they are placing more children (83% - 100%) within their own area. Within the first quarter of 2021/22, NCT placed 74% with NCT adopters. Interagency fees are currently charged at £27k-£33k.
- 5.9 During COVID-19, there has been a recent slowdown in adopter recruitment. Joining the RAA will provide the opportunity for a more strategic approach to marketing, incorporating targeted marketing activities, and developing inclusive websites to boost efforts to increase adopter diversity.
- 5.10 Within 2020/2021 there were 35 households approved as adopters, a reduction of 9 from the previous year. Whilst there has been a reduction in the number of children with a plan for adoption, this is attributable to the delay in care proceedings being concluded due to the impact of COVID-19 and the number is likely to increase again in the future. This may leave a gap between supply of adopters and need for adoptive families. Membership of the RAA will provide access to a wider pool of adopters across the region through Family Adoption Links thus increasing the likelihood of finding permanent families for children in a timely way.
- 5.11 Currently 82% of NCT adopters are White British which means placing children with adopters of a similar ethnicity can be hard to achieve for children of BME background. The diverse populations present in the local authorities' part of the RAA will increase the likelihood of identifying suitable adopters for this group of children.
- 5.12 By becoming a member of the RAA, NCT will be able to both benefit from and contribute to sharing of best practice between RAA members. This spans the whole of the adoption process but particularly in relation to training of adopters and adoption support. All prospective adopters attend Preparation for Adoption training and this is currently held 6 times per year in NCT. Within an RAA prospective adopters will be able to join preparation training facilitated by the other LAs meaning this can be completed as soon as possible and without delay to the assessment process.

6. Implications (including financial implications)

6.1 Resources and Financial

- 6.1.1 There are no resources or financial implications arising from the proposals. The costs for operating Corporate Parenting and Adoptions Services are within the NCT contract sum and joining an RAA will not have an impact on these costs.

6.2 Legal

- 6.2.1 The Government policy paper, 'Regionalising Adoption', published in 2015, sets out their plans for all local authority adoption services to merge into larger RAAs. In addition, the Government subsequently legislated to provide powers in Section 15 of the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to require local authority adoption services to join an RAA where they were not making voluntary plans to do so by 2020. A dispensation was agreed with the DfE pending local government reorganisation so that both NNC and WNC could take the formal decision to join the RAA.

6.3 Risk

6.3.1 If the committee were to approve the proposal, there is a risk that Family Adoptions Links could refuse entry to an additional adoption service joining and that the DfE may not approve the proposal. However, these risks are mitigated by both the RAA and DfE being supportive of the proposal.

6.3.2 If the councils did not approve the proposal, there is a risk that the DfE would use their rights to intervene and instruct the councils to join an RAA.

6.4 Consultation

6.4.1 NCT has consulted the following stakeholders as part of their decision making:

- North and West Northamptonshire Councils through the Operational Commissioning Group and engagement with the Director of Children's Services and Lead Members for Children's Services
- The Department for Education
- Family Adoption Links

6.5 Consideration by Scrutiny

6.5.1 This report has not been considered by Scrutiny.

6.6 Climate Impact

6.6.1 There are no significant climate/environmental impacts arising from the proposed recommendations in this report.

6.7 Community Impact

6.7.1 There are no distinct community impacts arising from the proposed recommendations in this report.

7. Background Papers

7.1 None.