



## Children's Trust Joint Committee 22 September 2021

<b>Report Title</b>	<b>Approval of NCT Joining a Regional Adoption Agency</b>	
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### List of Appendices

None

#### **1. Purpose of Report**

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- 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**

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- 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**

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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**

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#### **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**

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- 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

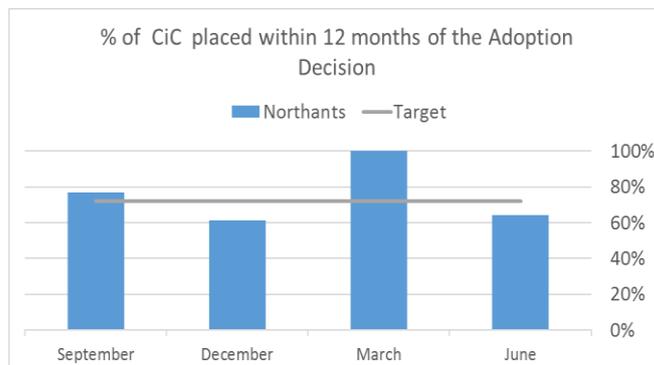
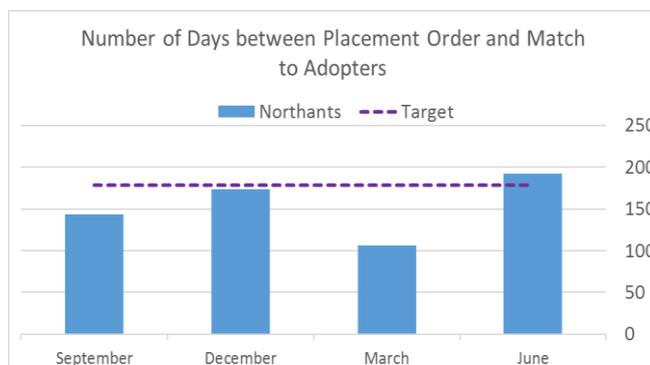
5.3 The proposed RAA arrangement has a governance board where NNC / WNC / NCT will be represented by the NCT Director of Social Care who will report back where required through the Operational Commissioning Group chaired by the Director of Children's Services.

### 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)**

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### **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**

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7.1 None.