TITLE	**Thames Valley Adoption**
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on 26 January 2017
WARD	None specific
DIRECTOR	Judith Ramsden, Director of People Services
LEAD MEMBER	Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Executive Member for Children's Services

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OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

- Improvements to adoption services for both children and adopters.
- Excellent value for money.

RECOMMENDATION

The Executive is recommended to:

1) support Wokingham's shared service arrangements being extended to become Adopt Thames Valley Regional Adoption Agency. The new shared service is to be hosted by Oxfordshire County Council, with a base for Berkshire in Wokingham;

2) delegate the final decision on details to the Director of People Services and Lead Member for Children's Services;

3) support the Lead Member for Children's Services being a member of the new governance board.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

This report provides an overview of plans to set up a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) across the Thames Valley Region. It describes the legislative framework, potential benefits for children and families and the planned timetable for setting up the RAA. The purpose of the report is to secure in principle, support for Wokingham joining the RAA.

1. Background

In June 2015 the Government published a paper titled Regionalising Adoption, it set out provision for the creation of Regional Adoption Agencies(RAA). An RAA is a service delivering adoption services across multiple local authority areas. The RAA guidance specifically refers to recruiting, matching and supporting of adopters. RAAs will also include voluntary adoption agencies as partners. There is no definitive expectation on the type of organisation that will deliver the RAA functions, but guidance referred to four potential models, they are:

- Local authority shared service
- Local authority owned company
- Joint venture between local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies
- Commissioned service (outsourced to a VAA)

The Government have stated that they expect every local authority to be part of an RAA or to have delegated their adoption functions to one by 2020. They have also said that they will use the powers of the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to require authorities to do this from 2017 if insufficient progress is being made towards this aim.

There are many good reasons for joining an RAA beyond the threat of compulsion that has been set out by government. It also seems likely that local authorities who are involved in the setting up and design of RAAs will have more influence and control over the destiny of their adoption services than those who choose to leave it until later.

2. Developing Adopt Thames Valley

Adopt Thames Valley (ATV) is being developed with the support of the Department for Education (DfE). They have granted funding to assist the partner organisations to work together to develop a new service that delivers both better outcomes for children and adopters whilst also reducing costs for the local authorities participating.

Adopt Thames Valley is building on work carried out by four of the participating local authorities (Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham). In 2014 Adopt Berkshire was set up, it is a shared service hosted by Windsor and Maidenhead delivering adoption services on behalf of all four authorities. This has been successful in promoting positive outcomes for children, external validation (Wokingham received a Good judgement for adoption from Ofsted in 2015) and has delivered savings. Adopt Berkshire is a good demonstration that the concept of shared and joined up adoption services works. The DfE have cited Adopt Berkshire as an example of good practice, but also indicated that it is too small to constitute an RAA.

The plan is to develop ATV as a shared service partnership between seven local authorities (Bracknell Forest, Oxfordshire, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham, Swindon and Reading) along with two Voluntary Adoption Agencies (PACT and Barnardos). The local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies are working to develop the new service, it will provide adoption services across the geographical area of the participating local authorities. Following the completion of a recent due diligence process it has been agreed that Oxfordshire will be the host authority for ATV.

The development of Adopt Thames Valley is being overseen by a project with representation at DCS or Assistant Director Level for each of the participating

authorities, It is envisaged that when the service becomes operational the membership of this group will be expanded to include other key stakeholders (e.g. lead members) and will be responsible for the governance of Adopt Thames Valley. The project is also being developed with significant involvement from frontline adoption staff and managers.

During October and November Adopt Thames Valley invited expressions of interest from participating authorities for hosting the new service and completed an extensive due diligence process. Oxfordshire County Council were the only authority to put themselves forward and we closely scrutinised through the due diligence process. This culminated in a meeting on the 7th November 2016 with local authority Chief Executives, Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members. On completion of the due diligence process there was unanimous support for Oxfordshire hosting Adopt Thames Valley. Following on from this Oxfordshire have mobilised a team including a dedicated project manager and appropriate service leads (e.g. HR, legal, ICT, Communications etc.) to take the project forward.

The service specification, team structure and funding mechanism for the new service are being developed at present. The ATV board have already agreed the following principles for the:

- No overall increase in spend
- Interagency fees will be abolished between participating local authorities
- The funding mechanism must be acceptable to all participating local authorities
- The funding mechanism must be acceptable to the host authority (Oxfordshire)
- It must transparent open and based on published data
- Services not included will be explicitly identified (e.g. Adoption Allowances)
- Individual contributions will not subsidise each other (smoothing costs across years acceptable as adoption activity is very volatile in small authorities)

The funding mechanism and service specification will be finalised early in 2017.

All of the local authorities are currently working to obtain political agreement to setting up ATV, it is anticipated that this will be completed early in 2017.

Following completion of this work detailed plans for the service will be developed (including; budget, staffing structure, premises and governance arrangements). It is anticipated that the new service will build on the strengths of Adopt Berkshire (e.g. Wokingham based office) and will include a combination of senior officers and elected members in the governance arrangements.

3. Potential Benefits and Risks of Adopt Thames Valley

In summary the key anticipated benefits of the Adopt Thames Valley model are:

- improved outcomes for children through the availability of a larger pool of adopters
- improved ability to place harder to place children for adoption (e.g. older children, children with disabilities, sibling groups and black or minority ethnic children)
- improved experience for adopters through quicker matches with children who need placements
- better value for local authorities through economies of scale in the recruitment

and assessment process for adopters
- potential savings for local authorities through placing children with adopters more quickly (i.e. saving foster care costs)
- improved adoption support services across a wider geographical area.

The project is not without risks. Whilst the larger scale presents opportunities for more efficient and effective adoption services there will also be challenges created by working across a wider geographic area with a diverse group of local authorities. These risks are being managed through robust project management and a strong governance structure overseeing the development of the new service.

Work started on ATV in December 2015, over the duration of the project there have been some significant changes. We now have a group of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies that are committed to the project. We are currently in negotiations with the Department for Education to finalise funding through to Autumn 2017 when we envisage the new service will become operational. Some of the key activities and events in the planned timeline are set out below:

- November 2016 to January 2017 – Local Authority Partners to secure political commitment to joining the new service
- Spring 2017 - Formal consultation with staff affected by the setting up of the new service
- Spring 2017 – Logistical arrangements for new service finalised
- Early Summer 2017 - Staffing arrangements for Adopt Thames Valley finalised
- September 2017 - Adopt Thames Valley becomes operational

4. Analysis of Issues

Options Available to Wokingham

No Change

The Government has said on a number of occasions that it expects all local authorities to be part of a RAA by the year 2020. This aspiration was first set out in 'Regionalising Adoption' (June 2015). It was reiterated by Edward Timpson in a speech in February 2016 and also referenced in 'Adoption – Agenda for Change' (March 2016). The government has also enacted legislation enabling them to intervene to determine how individual local authorities provide adoption services. In light of these statements and actions it would seem unlikely that maintaining the current situation would be viable in the longer term. This commitment has also been re-iterated following the change in government after the vote to leave the European Union.

Join an Alternative Regional Adoption Agency

Adopt Thames Valley is one of nineteen RAA projects that are being set up nationally. The option exists to approach other projects with a view to joining them as an alternative. We adjudge ATV to be the best option for Wokingham at present for three main reasons. Firstly Wokingham is geographically well placed within ATV, which is potentially advantageous in terms of identifying suitable placements in reasonable travelling distance. Secondly the shared service model currently being proposed maintains flexibility going forward, some other RAAs are developing organisations and structures that would be more difficult to influence or adapt once set up (e.g. joint

mutual ventures or services wholly delivered through commissioned approach). Thirdly the other three Adopt Berkshire authorities are planning to join ATV and this will enable us to continue to work together and build on the improvements already made. Joining another RAA would not enable us to be involved in the design of the new service and it is also very unlikely that we would continue to have a team based in Wokingham.

5. Implications for Wokingham Children and Residents

Adoption is a small, but critical element of our children's services. For Looked After children who are unable to return home to their birth family or other relatives adoption provides permanence and security. At present we have 82 looked after children of which 16 are aged under 10 (adoption is rarely an option for children older than 10). Since 2011/12 we have used adoption for an average of 4 children each year (varying from 2 to 5). The changes described in this report will also affect people wishing to adopt who live in our area, over recent years between 0 and 6 children have been placed with Wokingham adopters.

The creation of Adopt Thames Valley will not remove our corporate parenting responsibilities for children who need adoption. We will continue to ensure appropriate adoption plans are agreed for Wokingham children through the scrutiny of Agency Decision Maker (ADM). The ADM role is fulfilled by the Assistant Director. We will also take a very active role in the governance and performance management of ATV when it starts to deliver services.

A central aim of Adopt Thames Valley will be to improve adoption support. This is critical for both children and adopters. Adoption support improvements will extend to families who live in Wokingham who have adopted through other local authorities or voluntary adoption agency. Good quality adoption support is important the life chances of adopted children and the wellbeing of adopters. It can also be an important factor in avoiding other high costs interventions.

6. Governance

Adopt Thames Valley will have a governance board that will include representation from all partner organisation. Oxfordshire will be hosting the service, but all local authorities will have an influence in the design and running of the new organisation. Our experience of, and key role in the development of the Adopt Berkshire will ensure that we are able to make a valuable contribution to this important element of the project. The governance structure will include both officers and members and we are proposing that the Wokingham Lead Member should be a member of the governance structure as soon as it is established.

7. Conclusion

Wokingham stopped directly providing most adoption services in December 2014 when Adopt Berkshire was set up. The creation of Adopt Thames Valley represents a logical development that will enable adoption services to be even more effective and efficient.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION
The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Anticipated cost neutral	Sufficient funding	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Anticipated cost neutral	Sufficient funding	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Anticipated cost neutral	Sufficient funding	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The existing budget for the Adoption services to transfer to Adopt Thames Valley is £320,000.

The cost of the new service has yet to be finalised, but it will not be more than our existing adoption spend commitment. The new service is being developed using a zero based budget approach and costs will be apportioned relative to use of the service.

There is potential for savings in alternative foster care costs from improved performance and placing children with adopters more quickly.

The DfE are providing grant for set-up costs.

Cross-Council Implications

Property – The Adopt Berkshire Service is currently hosted by Windsor and Maidenhead, but operates from Wokingham Borough Council Offices in Hurricane Way Woodley. It is planned that services will continue to be provided from the Hurricane Way Offices.

Priorities
Improve educational attainment and focus on every child achieving their potential
Adoption enables children who are unable to live with their birth parents or wider family to have the best possible chance of achieving their potential in education and succeeding in other areas of their lives. Joining ATV will help to ensure this option is open to children in Wokingham who need it.

Improve the customer experience when accessing services
Adopt Thames Valley will have a strong customer focus and bringing together a group of local authorities will help to enhance the services for both adopters and children. The larger scale of the agency will reduce waiting times and help to maximise the chances of matches being made between children and adopters.

List of Background Papers
DFE Rationalising Adoption June 2015   https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

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