

TITLE	Adopt Thames Valley: Regionalised Adoption Agency
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 20 March 2018
WARD	None Specific
DIRECTOR	Paul Senior, Interim Director of People Services

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

- Improvements to adoption services for both children and adopters.
- Excellent value for money.
- Compliance with the Department for Education directive to Local Authorities.

RECOMMENDATION

For Overview and Scrutiny to note the progress and update of Wokingham Children's Services shared service Adopt Thames Valley.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Adopt Thames Valley shared adoption service was launched on 1st December 2017, following an eighteen-month project board to bring together adoption services with voluntary agencies across the Thames Valley region.

The Regionalised Adoption Agency (RAA) It is hosted by Oxfordshire County Council after a rigorous due diligence process. The framework and staffing from the shared service that was Adopt Berkshire has now amalgamated with Reading, Swindon and Oxfordshire to form the new regionalised adoption agency. The Governance structure provides for equal involvement and representation by each Local Authority in the running of and decision making for the RAA.

A formal launch will occur in April 2018.

Background

1 Rationale for Change

The change to a new regional adoption agency has been made for two key reasons. Firstly, all the participating local authorities have assessed that the provision of adoption services can be developed and improved by working collaboratively across a larger area. Secondly, the government have enacted legislation, which requires all local authorities to join a Regional Adoption Agency by 2020.

In June 2015, the Government published a paper titled Regionalising Adoption, it set out provision for the creation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). 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. The guidance also requires that RAAs will include voluntary adoption agencies as partners.

The Government expects every local authority to be part of an RAA or to have delegated their adoption functions to one by 2020.

In summary, the key anticipated benefits of the Adopt Thames Valley (ATV) 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.

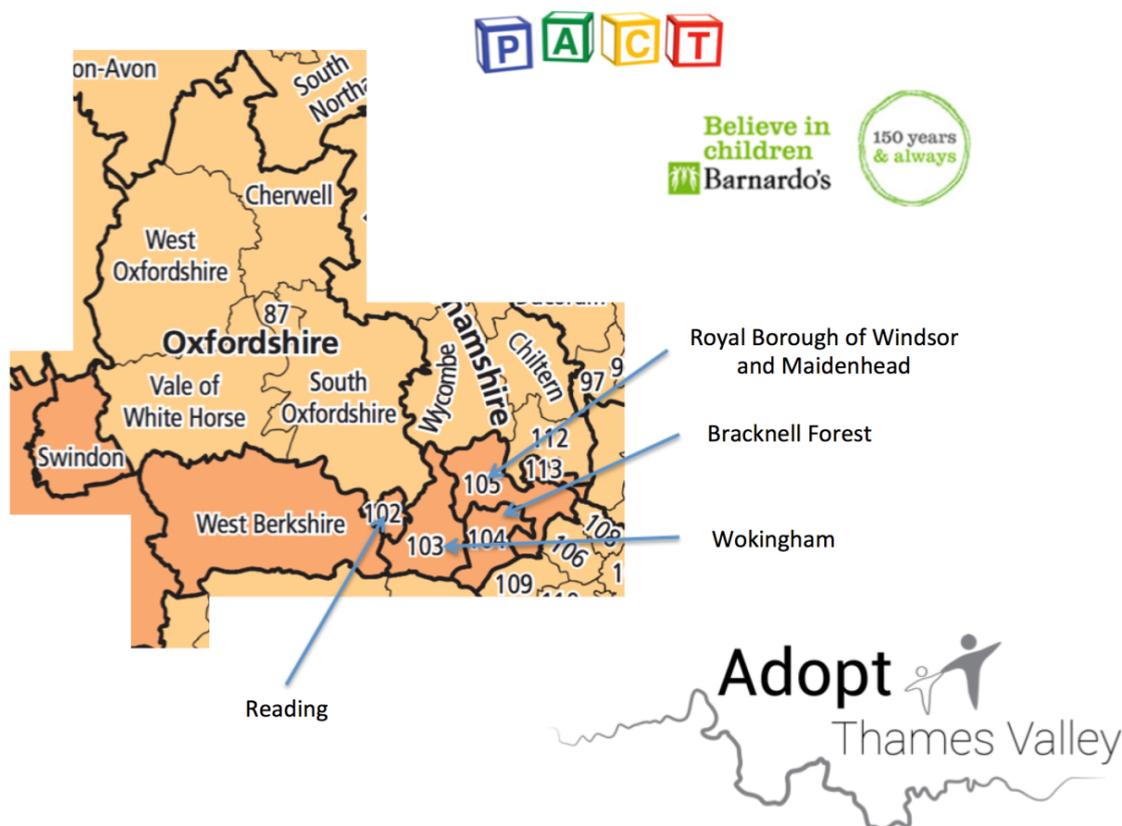
Four (Bracknell Forest, RBWM, West Berks and Wokingham) of the seven authorities involved in the development of ATV had already joined up their adoption services in late 2014 for the reasons set above, prior to the government requiring authorities to make these changes.

Work started to develop ATV in December 2015. Staff and managers in all the local authorities have been involved in the planning and design of the new service.

ATV has been established as a shared service partnership between seven local authorities (Bracknell Forest, Oxfordshire, West Berkshire, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham, Swindon and Reading) along with two Voluntary Adoption Agencies (PACT and Barnardo's). It will provide adoption services across the geographical area of the participating local authorities. Following the completion of a due diligence process it was agreed that Oxfordshire

will be the host authority for ATV (and consequently become the employer of all staff).

2 Geographical Area Covered by the Regional Adoption Agency



3. What the new RAA will do:

Adoption Team

- Recruit adopters
- Family find
- Match children and adopters
- Speed up the placement of harder to place children
- Non-agency adoptions/overseas adoption

Permanence Support Team

On behalf of the seven LA the Permanence Support Team will provide and gradually develop -

- Adoption support
- Special guardianship support
- Services to Adults Affected by Adoption
- Birth Relative Support services
- Letterbox Services

ATV Adoption and Permanence Panels

- Oxford Panel – adoption and SGO – two/three per month
- Swindon Panel – adoption only one per month until February 2018. From March 2018 all Swindon adoption cases will be heard by the Oxford Panel
- Woodley Panel – adoption only two per month

4. Staffing Structure

Context

ATV has been developed with three operational teams, supported by an administrative team. There will be two locality teams who will be responsible for all work in relation to the recruitment, assessment, approval and matching of adopters. These teams will also carry out all the work in relation to family finding and the placing of children. One team will operate from the North part of the ATV area covering the Oxfordshire and Swindon areas. The other team will provide services across the Berkshire and Reading areas. The third team will provide Adoption and SGO support across the entire ATV geographical area and will have staff based in both the Oxford and Woodley Offices. These teams will be supported by an administration team working across the entire ATV areas with staff embedded in each of the operational teams.

Office Locations

There are three main Adoption Centres across the Thames Valley Adoption Agency Region, providing the main work base for workers in the Adoption Teams. These centres will be in the following locations:

- 4440 Nash Court John Smith Drive Oxford Business Park South Cowley Oxford OX4 2RU;
- Woodley Centre, Woodley, Wokingham Berkshire RG5 4UX;
- Lyndhurst Centre Lyndhurst Crescent Swindon SN3 2RW

There will be one Permanence Support team based in two locations:

- Nash Court, Cowley, Oxford
- Woodley Centre, Woodley, Wokingham Berkshire

Panel Advisors

There will be 1 Panel Advisor based in each of the following locations:

- Nash Court, Cowley, Oxford
- Woodley Centre, Woodley, Wokingham Berkshire

Please see appendix 1 for staffing structure.

5. Governance structure

A Partnership Board including DCS's and VAA Chief Executives was set up to oversee the development of ATV. The Partnership Board is currently chaired by Rachael Wardell, DCS West Berkshire. The Board has been meeting monthly to review progress and agree decisions and will continue to meet regularly to provide ongoing governance.

6. Implementation group

A 'task and finish' group was set up within the authority to manage the practical implementation of the transfer to a RAA. Membership included Children's Commissioning, HR, ICT, Finance, Legal and the ATV Project manager.

7. Specialist Team

A Specialist team was set up to develop the structure and service specification and discuss other practice related issues. This has included regular discussion with managers and practitioners in the teams affected by the planned changes.

8. Summary of our journey to go live: 1st December 2017

- Work started in late 2015
- Service specification developed
- Shared service model agreed
- Oxfordshire agreed as host authority
- Budget and contributions agreed
- Councils obtained member approval
- Staffing structure for the new service agreed
- Service Manager appointed
- Vision for the new adoption agency developed
- Consultation with staff and other stakeholders undertaken
- Staff posts confirmed
- Recruitment to vacant posts commenced
- Policies and procedures reviewed and updated
- Performance framework agreed
- Licenses and leases for new sites agreed
- Building work in the Woodley office commenced
- Staff issued with telephones and ICT equipment
- Training and support with new systems provided
- Data migration on adoption cases completed
- Legal agreement completed and signed by all LA partners
- TUPE transfers progressed
- Contracts for commissioned services reviewed

9. Communications & Engagement



- New branding for Adopt Thames Valley developed
- Adopt Thames Valley website live from 1st December
- A social media campaign ran during weeks one & 2 following go live.
- Text was provided for each LA's website to go on the adoption page with a link to adoptthamesvalley.co.uk;

10. Future work planned for ATV during 2018/19

Staffing

- Continue recruitment to all vacant posts to ensure that ATV is fully staffed
- Remaining have now relocated to the Woodley office following completion of the building work
- Continue to address individual staffing issues following the TUPE process
- Team building for all new teams
- Whole Service event planned for March 2018

Permanence Support Team

Current service provision for Permanence Support varies significantly across each of the seven Local Authorities (LA), with each LA having areas of strength and areas needing development. ATV will continue to deliver the current support services provided by each individual Local Authority and will undertake a review of existing service provision to inform the development of ATV Permanence Support services

Media Launch

ATV launch is planned for April 2018 and it is hoped it will include the Children's Minister who will be present to launch the shared service to the public, agencies and the media.

Legal

To prepare a record of all the original agreements signed by the authorities and to make sure that the agreements are securely stored in Modern Records

Finance

Operation of finances, reporting and responsibilities to be agreed.

ICT

ICT will continue their involvement for several months to continue to support staff as needed.

Performance Management

To work with the Performance Management team to develop and deliver the required performance and information reports.

Commissioning and contracts

New contracts for all commissioned services are required for 2018/19. These are being worked on by Adopt Thames Valley governance Board and shared service commissioners.

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)	£244,211 Cost neutral	Sufficient funding	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£244, 211 Cost neutral	Sufficient funding	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£244,211 Cost neutral	Sufficient funding	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The budget for Adopt Thames valley is
Adoption: £145,351
Permanence: £98,860
Total: £244,211

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)
NA

List of Background Papers
N/A

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