

Cabinet Meeting Resolution

**Executive
Forward Plan
Reference**

E3665

Adoption West Contract

Date of Meeting	13-Nov-25
The Issue	That Cabinet agrees to continue with Adoption West as their preferred option for their Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), beyond February 2027, with a delegation to the DCS and Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Care to work with key stakeholders and partners (including adoptive family representatives) to further develop Adoption West, taking account of: - the direction of national policy as it relates to adoption, adoption support and other forms of permanence, and opportunities to expand or enhance Adoption West's remit accordingly. - the operational experience gained since March 2019. - a comprehensive review of resourcing, structures and oversight to ensure Adoption West operates on a sustainable basis, providing value for money for the participating LAs and good outcomes for children and adoptive families. - local government reform proposals; and, bring a further report to a future Cabinet meeting when this work is completed setting out revised proposals for Adoption West beyond February 2027. Adoption West is a company wholly owned and limited by guarantee of the six local authorities, established in March 2019 to deliver specified statutory adoption services on their behalf. The current arrangements come to an end in February 2027. The partners recently commissioned an external review of the progress to date, alongside a consideration of alternative RAA models to assist in determining the best approach to service provision, beyond the expiry of the current arrangements. The review concluded that the further development of Adoption West, consolidating and building upon the progress to date, represents the best option for service provision beyond February 2027, providing opportunities to innovate, as well as addressing the pressures and challenges that are evident in the adoption system both regionally and nationally. Subject to initial agreement by the six local authority partners to Adoption West's continuation, work would commence to refine the operating model, with the intention of bringing back detailed proposals later in 2026 for final approval. Ensuring a continuity of service and minimising the impact for children, families and staff will be integral to the development process. The details of the contract would be agreed by: Jean Kelly, (DCS) Joanne Parker, Service Manager, Ian Tomlinson, Commissioning Manager and Cllr May.

Cabinet Meeting Resolution

**Executive
Forward Plan
Reference**

E3665

The decision	(1) To agree, in principle, to continue with Adoption West as the council's preferred option for their regional adoption agency (RAA), beyond February 2027. (2) To delegate to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, to work with key stakeholders and partners (including adoptive family representatives) to further develop Adoption West, taking account of the matters set out in paragraph 11.1 of the report. (3) To bring a further report to a future Cabinet meeting once this work is completed setting out revised proposals for Adoption West beyond February 2027.
Rationale for decision	The current arrangements end in February 2027. The partners recently commissioned an external review of the progress to date, alongside a consideration of alternative RAA models to assist in determining the best approach to service provision, beyond the expiry of the current arrangements. The review concluded that the further development of Adoption West, consolidating and building upon the progress to date, represents the best option for service provision beyond February 2027, providing opportunities to innovate, as well as addressing the pressures and challenges that are evident in the adoption system both regionally and nationally. Adoption West (AW) is currently judged to be good in all respects by Ofsted having had two regulatory inspections, in 2022 and 2024, and has contributed positively to several children's services inspections involving the participating local authorities since 2019. AW's performance compares well with peers and service user feedback is overwhelmingly positive, with the most recent Adoption Barometer (2024) and annual service user survey showing many indicators performing as good if not better than national averages. Two reviews by Ofsted and the DfE, alongside published performance data and inspection reports provide an insight into the extent to which RAAs, in their various forms, have delivered against the core regionalisation aims – increasing adopter recruitment, reducing unnecessary delay, enhancing adoption support, and delivering cost efficiencies. Neither comes to a definitive view as to which form of RAA and/or organisation of resources therein has proven most effective. Consequently, the evidence for changing from AW to a hosted model for example based on improved outcomes is not compelling. Moreover, the salient features of an effective RAA highlighted by the studies, including local partner commitment, a shared vision and values, and effective governance and oversight, are evident within the AW model. A commissioned or collaborative model, with services delivered by a

Cabinet Meeting Resolution

**Executive
Forward Plan
Reference**

E3665

Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA – a voluntary sector organisation regulated by Ofsted to provide adoption services) was ruled out by the AW partners in 2016, due to the incipient nature of the provider market at that time. The closure and downsizing of several VAA providers over recent years suggests the market is potentially less stable than was the case previously. A market test exercise would be needed in coming to a definitive view however this would be challenging to complete within the time available while leaving sufficient time to complete a commissioning exercise.

The creation of Adoption West was a considerable undertaking, supported by central government funding and external expertise. A decision to move away from the current model towards some form of hosted model or the commissioning a third party, would require significant commissioning, legal, procurement and human resources, alongside social care leaders/practitioners with permanence and adoption expertise. There will inevitably be disruption and anxiety associated with such a substantive transformation process no matter how professionally managed, impacting on Adoption West staff and service users. Moreover, the central government funding provided through the previous regionalisation programme is unlikely to be available to support this.

A change to a hosted arrangement for example could be considered a retrograde step from an entity that has forged a distinct identity, which provides for shared ownership and accountability for the participating local authorities, with a demonstrable record of effectiveness.

Other options considered

The Education and Adoption Act 2016 contains a reserve power to require local authorities to transfer their adoption services into a regional arrangement. Moreover, recent communication with central government sets out an expectation for pan regional working between RAAs. Consequently, the options for LAs are limited to what form of RAA they work within rather than a return to the previous position of delivering adoption services on a single local authority basis. The options for AW partners are limited to the continuation and development of AW, a hosted model - with one or either LA providing a lead, or a commissioned/collaborative with a VAA. It is important to note that to date none of the participating local authorities has expressed a desire to host the service.

The challenge of delivering substantial change within the time available, the absence of external funding in support of change and the absence of unambiguous evidence that other forms of RAA would provide for better outcomes, are material factors when contemplating change for a service with profound ethical considerations for those involved. In the prevailing circumstances, building on a model that is succeeding is the only practicable option.

The Decision is subject to Call-In within 5 working days of publication of the decision