

Proposed Decision to be made by the Leader of the Council on or after 18 January 2019

Expansion of Adoption Central England (ACE)

1. Recommendation

That the Leader of the Council delegates authority for the Strategic Director of People to agree on behalf of Warwickshire County Council to extend the ACE partnership arrangement between Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, Coventry City Council, Warwickshire County Council and Worcestershire County Council to include Herefordshire Council on terms and conditions satisfactory to the Joint Managing Director (Resources).

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval for Adoption Central England (ACE), the regional adoption agency for Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, Coventry City Council, Warwickshire County Council and Worcestershire County Council to be extended to include Herefordshire Council. Warwickshire County Council will continue to host the regional adoption agency as a local authority shared service.
- 2.2 ACE delivers adoption agency functions of the five local authorities including the recruitment, assessment, training and approval of prospective adopters, the identification of prospective adopters for children who are in need of a new adoptive family, adoption support to adoptive families and some Special Guardianship support services and services to adult adopted people.

3. Background

- 3.1 It is the duty of every local authority to establish and maintain within their area a service designed to meet the needs in relation to adoption i.e. an Adoption Service.
- 3.2 A policy paper from the Department of Education (DfE) in January 2013 – ‘Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes’ identified the need for the re-organisation of the existing adoption system based as it is on each local authority delivering an adoption service as well as a voluntary adoption sector. The DfE’s ‘Regionalising Adoption’ paper published in June 2015 set out the government’s expectations for all local authorities to be part of regional adoption agencies (RAA). In April 2016 the DfE published a new policy document “Adoption: A Vision for Change” in which the government committed to deliver radical, whole system redesign by regionalising adoption services by ensuring all local authorities were part of a Regional Adoption Agency by 2020.
- 3.3 In response Coventry City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Council, Warwickshire County Council and Worcestershire County Council came

together to work towards the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency that has been named Adoption Central England (ACE). The service model was approved by Cabinet in each of the four Councils between October/November 2017 and the regional service became operational on 1 February 2018. The strategic direction for the service and monitoring functions are met through the ACE Executive Board on which representatives from all the local authority partner agencies and key stakeholders sit including from the voluntary adoption sector.

4. The Expansion Proposal

4.1 Herefordshire Council first expressed an interest in joining ACE, during the project phase of ACE and an initial application was made dated March 2017. At the meetings of the ACE Project Board on 20 April 2017 and further on 21 August 2017 there is reference to this. Purdah prevented action at that time and it was recorded that a steer was required from the region via the Adoption Leadership Board and also from the DfE appointed coach.

4.2 Further correspondence was received from Herefordshire Council dated 23 January 2018 and a meeting took place with representatives from the council, the ACE Lead Manager, chair of the ACE Executive Board, and Warwickshire County Council finance officer on 28th June 2018. On 6th September 2018 the ACE Executive Board confirmed the application process to be followed that would satisfy the requirements for due diligence. Assurance statements from the various work streams were requested that Herefordshire would be able to meet the ACE requirements. Essentially this process consisted of:

- Detailed application form including financial position statement,
- Scoring across 12 key areas within each local authority and by the Lead Manager and voluntary sector partners,
- Assimilation of the scores, identification of risks and clarification of issues at an Extraordinary ACE Executive Board meeting that took place on 23rd October 2018.

4.3 The ACE Partnership and Hosting Agreement allow for the new parties to join the regional adoption agency however no party shall be allowed to enter into the terms of the Agreement without the prior written consent of all parties.

4.4 The ACE Executive Board at the extraordinary meeting held on 23rd October 2018 recommended that Herefordshire Council should be allowed to join Adoption Central England. This was subject to ensuring that their financial contribution is correct and cost neutral to the services and the production of a costed transitional plan. Further, ACE would require Herefordshire to have at least 85% of its roles occupied at the time it joins ACE.

4.5 Particular areas of strength identified in the Herefordshire application were:

- Support for the ACE Governance arrangements – having officers at the appropriate level attending the key meetings,

- Service performance – Herefordshire has been assessed by OFSTED as having a good adoption service where adoption for children is achieved in a timely way, with family finding and matching identified as strong areas of practice. Further access to post adoption support is good enabling help and support to be available without delay.
- They have a stable and experienced workforce who are trained in areas that accord with ACE,
- They are highly motivated to be part of ACE having previously enjoyed a close working partnership with Worcestershire County Council Adoption Service, and having practices that are predominately consistent with those of ACE as outlined in the ACE Service Specification.

4.6 Another benefits for ACE is the opportunity to operate on greater scale extending the geographical reach of potential adoptive placements for children. ACE would also be in a position to strengthen its profile in the south west of the region with the development of ‘sub hub’ allowing easier access to services and support for prospective and approved adopters. There would also opportunities for greater efficiencies in working practices releasing in particular managerial capacity to specialise in aspects of practice and service development such as family finding and matching.

5. Implications, impact and risk management.

The risks to ACE relating to this proposal are as follows:

Risk	Mitigation	Risk Management
ACE becomes too large, over a wider geographical area and loses its unique identify	Herefordshire has a previous identity and experience of collaborative working with Worcestershire. Herefordshire would be the second smallest adoption service within ACE having relatively low numbers of children looked after and adopted children as a consequence.	The strengthening of operational arrangements in the southwest of the region e.g. sub hub. Herefordshire fully accepts the ACE model and can easily assimilate into the ACE way of working.
ACE is still within the first 12 months of operations and a new joiner will impact up the progress made to date.	ACE has established itself well within its first 9 months and has sound processes in place and well-founded governance process.	ACE is continually reviewing the way it works in order to ensure that the key outcomes are met – the joining Herefordshire is timely and will allow opportunities to re-examine ways of working and extend services.

Change can create a dip in performance.	The regionalisation of adoption services is showing evidence of improved performance and the relationship between ACE and the local authorities is well established.	Herefordshire will be joining ACE as a high performing adoption service with practices that are very aligned with those of ACE.
Insufficient adopters to meet the needs of children requiring placement	The pool of children from Herefordshire requiring placement is manageable and Herefordshire will provide families for existing ACE children	The Adopter Recruitment Sufficiency Strategy will be reviewed to explore the potential to extend recruitment within Herefordshire and their neighbouring authorities.
Costs associated with change – including IT, legal etc.	The DfE have confirmed that transitional funding will available and Herefordshire have agreed that this will be allocated between them and ACE.	A detailed and costed transitional plan will be produced for approval by the ACE Executive Board on 10 th January 2019.
Staffing loss.	Herefordshire has a small committed staff group of adoption practitioners who are aware that regionalisation is necessary. They have established relationships with staff in the ex-Worcestershire teams and are used to working together	Herefordshire have a named HR lead and will work with ACE and their staff group in transitioning to the service. Staff of other local authorities within ACE are currently seconded to Warwickshire as the host partner. This arrangement commenced on 1 st February 2018 and is envisaged to last for up to two years. ACE is currently considering whether at the end of the secondment period, seconded staff may transfer to Warwickshire as the host authority for the shared service, (subject always to the necessary approval). Herefordshire staff would be included in any such TUPE transfer.
Financial risk to the existing ACE local authorities.	The ACE Executive Board is clear that there is to be no financial cost to them and some costs will in future be shared between five as opposed to four local authorities.	The transitional funding will support one off costs arising from the expansion proposal and a detailed financial analysis is to be received by the Board in January 2019.

6. Equalities / Equality Impact Assessment

- 6.1 The Equalities Impact Assessment is due for review and this will address any equalities issues arising from the proposed expansion. At the present time it only envisaged that it will potentially extend placement opportunities for children. Further it will strengthen the presence of ACE in the south west of the region easing access for prospective and approved adopters.
- 6.2 The main impact on staff will be working in a wider geographical area but flexible working arrangements will mitigate the potential impact alongside the proposal to develop a sub hub in the region.

7. Summary and recommendation.

- 7.1 Herefordshire Council have shown a sustained commitment to joining ACE as their local regional adoption agency. This matter has been considered by the ACE Executive Board and a process was agreed that evidenced due diligence. The Board are supporting the application subject to Herefordshire's financial contribution being correct and cost neutral for the local authorities who already form ACE. Further there will be a detailed transitional plan supported by funding from the DfE.
- 7.2 Herefordshire is a small but effective adoption service with an experienced staff group. Overall they present a low risk to Warwickshire, ACE and the expansion of ACE will allow opportunities to strengthen the ACE presence in the south west of the region.

Background papers: None

	Name	Contact Information
Report Author	Brenda Vincent	brendavincent@aceadoption.com
Assistant Director	John Coleman	johncoleman@warwickshire.gov.uk
Strategic Director	Nigel Minns	nigelminns@warwickshire.gov.uk
Portfolio Holder	Cllr Izzi Seccombe	cllrseccombe@warwickshire.gov.uk

The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Councillors O'Rourke, Butlin, Boad, Timms, Seccombe and Singh Birdi