



Durham County Council Adoption Service

Annual Report of the Adoption & Permanence Service

1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019

Adopt with us



Durham County Council Adoption Service overview

- The Head of Children's Services is Helen Fergusson.
- Karen Robb, Strategic Manager, for Looked After Children and Permanence Service has continued to serve as the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).
- Carmel Murray, Operations Manager for Fostering, Adoption and Full Circle was appointed and took up the role of Adoption Agency Advisor for Child's Permanence Reports in August 2018. She left Durham County Council to take up employment in a neighbouring authority in March 2019.
- Sara Peterson Team Manager has assumed the role of Adoption Agency Advisor in respect of children's cases.
- There continues to be a core group of experienced and skilled social workers in the Adoption Team.
- The newly created three Social Work Consultants have dedicated practice lead roles. Lindsey Gray leads Post Adoption Support, Sarah Fitzpatrick leads Early Permanence and Family Finding, and Wendy Ellis leads (From May 2019) Recruitment Assessment and Adopter Training.
- The Team Manager Adoption post is currently vacant. A permanent appointment has been made and the new Team Manager will start in September. The changes in management arrangements over the year have been difficult for the team and the service.
- There were 23 Adoption Panel meetings held during the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.
- Dianne Main has continued to serve as Adoption Panel Administrator, supported by Emma Dobie and Catherine Dawson.
- The Adoption Panel Independent Chairs, Barbara Brelsford and Mary Greenwood, Agency Medical Advisor / Vice-Chairman Dr Sally Wade and Independent Panel Members continue to contribute to the training and preparation courses for prospective adopters.
- Elected Members are also Panel Members. These are Councillor Ivan Jewell and Councillor Heather Smith.
- Annual Appraisals for Adoption Panel members continue to be conducted and have been completed within the year. Regular monthly information drop in sessions were held throughout this period.

- Information, counselling and preparation courses (ICP) have been held as part of the adopter's recruitment and assessment. Further training, preparation and counselling courses will be planned, however will be jointly undertaken with our RAA partners, Sunderland City Council: Together for Children and Cumbria County Council. (In 2020, Durham Adoption Service will become part of a Regional Adoption Agency - RAA).
- Durham Children and Young Peoples Services continue to provide good quality adoption support services with therapeutic input from Dr Joyce Powell, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, and the Full Circle Therapeutic Team.
- The number of adopters receiving an adoption allowance for their child / children remains high. Currently 80 families are receiving an allowance totalling £770,228.16 per year.
- Children with care plans of adoption and who are placed with prospective adopters have enjoyed stability and security in their new permanent families and there have been no adoption disruptions in this period.
- All children with a care plan of adoption are matched with suitable adopters. Wherever possible the match has taken place at the earliest opportunity.
- Where children cannot be matched with in house adopters this is identified quickly to avoid delay and a local, regional and national search is undertaken at the earliest opportunity to ensure that a placement is identified to meet the children's needs.
- In partnership with Sunderland City Council Together for Children and Cumbria County Council Adoption Services; Activity Days have been held throughout the year feature children with a care plan of adoption. This has proved to be a positive experience for both children and adopters. There have been several positive matches identified using this approach.
- To meet the needs of children in Durham, particularly new born babies and infants there has been an increase in the numbers of Fostering to Adopt placements (F2A). These placements provide children the opportunity to move into their new permanent family at the earliest opportunity. The placement is with approved adopters who have additional temporary approval as foster carers. When the courts grant a Placement Order the child's placement and status changes from fostering to 'placed for adoption'). To date, Durham have made 10 Fostering to Adopt placements.
- The Annual Family Summer Fun Day took place in July 2018, and the Christmas Party was held in December 2018. Both events were well received and attended. A Summer Fun Day and Christmas Party will be arranged in 2019.

As an Adoption Agency we will

- Ensure that children are placed, with siblings wherever possible, within a timescale that is best for them and without unnecessary delay.
- Treat prospective adopters and adopters with openness, fairness and respect.
- Make prospective adopters' first points of contact informative and welcoming.
- Approach adopter recruitment in the spirit of inclusiveness with a view to identifying potential and opportunity – no-one should be automatically excluded.
- Recruit prospective adopters who can meet all or most of the needs of children waiting for, or likely to need, adoption and signpost prospective adopters to other agencies if there is insufficient local demand.
- Explain to prospective adopters the needs and profiles of the children waiting to be adopted.
- Ensure preparation and training, the home study assessment, and approval process are explained and proceed efficiently.
- Regularly review progress on matching with prospective adopters, and where a match cannot be found locally inform waiting adopters about 'Linkmaker' (an independent organisation where children who have a plan of adoption are feature nationally).
- Provide adopters and prospective adopters with information, counselling and support, as and when needed, throughout the adoption journey and beyond.
- Provide prospective adopters with information about the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).
- Work in partnership, and with other agencies and the Courts, to ensure that all decisions are timely and joined-up.

The Adoption Service is committed to reflecting the spirit and intentions of the Adopters Charter 2011.

Service information – Children

Number of children referred to adoption 1/4/18-31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
15	10	1	4	5	3	16	6	2	7	9	3	81

Comparison 2017/18 - 101

Number of agency decisions of a plan of adoption 1/4/18-31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
6	5	10	1	0	4	20	3	7	15	5	1	77

Comparison 2017/18 - 61

Placement Orders granted 1/4/18-31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
4	3	3	6	7	1	3	12	3	8	3	2	55

Comparison 2017/18 - 54

Children matched at panel and placed for Adoption 1/4/18-31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
5	6	2	4	10	3	6	1	2	4	2	4	49

Comparison 2017/18 - 35

Children made subject to Adoption Orders 1/4/18-31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
2	7	2	2	4	5	4	9	2	4	4	2	44

Comparison 2017/18 – 53

The total number of children who were placed but not yet adopted including those from previous years at the end of March 19 is :21

Disruptions 1/4/18-31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Comparison 2017/18 – 0

At the end of March 2019 there were **59 children with ADM**, allocated for family finding. Of the 59 children 36 had Placement Orders. Of the 36 with Placement Orders 17 have strong links and either progressing to panel or being explored. Family Finding is continuing for the other 19 children.

Summary:

The figures for 2018/19 show there has been a decrease in the number of referrals in comparison to the previous year (from 101 on 2017/18 to **81** in 2018/19).

There has been an increase in plans of adoption being agreed by the Agency Decision Maker (from 61 on 2017/18 to **77** in 2018/19). The number of Placement Orders are similar; (in 2017/18 54 Placement Orders were granted and 2018/19 **55** Placement Orders were granted).

In comparison to 2017/18 there has been an increase in children matched and placed for adoption (from 35 in 2017/18 to **49** in 2018/19).

Durham County Council Adoption Service have increasingly several inter-agency placements due to insufficient suitable inhouse adopters being available. Consequently; in 2018/19 a total of **44** children were matched with adopters from other adoption agencies (LA or VAA – Voluntary Adoption Agency). This has a significant impact on the budget and expenditure for looked after children resulting in **an overspend of £629,015**) in respect of 37 children, for inter-agency placements in the 2018/19. Additionally, the increase in inter-agency placements impacts upon workloads of staff working across all teams as they often spend significant period travelling throughout the country to consider prospective matches and support adoptive placements.

The figures for 2018/19 show that there has been a decrease in the number of children being made subject to an Adoption Order. In 2017/18 53 children were made subject to an Adoption Order and in 2018/19 only **44** children were made subject to an Adoption Order.

Of all the children who are currently placed with approved adopters, **21** of those children currently do not have an Adoption Order. Adopters can apply for the Adoption Order 10 weeks after the child is placed and in most circumstances the adopters will make the application. There are instances where an adoptive placement may need a further period of review and in these instances, adopters are advised and/or chose to delay applying for the Adoption Order. A further example which may delay the granting of Adoption Order is when birth parents further contest the plan of Adoption.

There were no pre-Adoption Order disruptions in 2017/18 or 2018/19. The last disruption was in 2015, this is testament to the skill of our staff in matching and the support provided to our adopters and children in placement.

Achieving Early Permanence

In August 2018 Durham CYPS launched our Early Permanence Strategy and our teams are working hard to further embed the strategy and the Care Planning for children to improve outcomes and reduce delay. The primary focus of Early Permanency Planning is to prevent children drifting within looked after arrangements-and to provide a clear practice framework focussing on permanency.

Durham County Council is committed as a Corporate Parent for Children looked after and young people and will work diligently to find permanent, safe homes for children in care that meet their specific needs, in a timely manner. There are now much stronger and improved ways in which we work with social work teams across the County to ensure we are delivering the aims and objectives of our Early Permanence Strategy

The Adoption Team works closely with the Looked After Permanence Team and the Pre-Birth Teams. The LAC Permanence team are primarily responsible for writing the Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) and for collating life-story work for those children with a plan of adoption. Where childrens cases are held within the Pre Birth Team they will undertake the CPR's and associated work. This means that workers are particularly skilled and experienced in this area and this means the overall quality of the work is good whilst also reducing delay for children. Once a Placement Order has been granted the Permanence Team, the Pre Birth Team and Adoption Team will work together to undertake family finding, preparing the child for adoption, and putting together a plan for introductions and adoption a support plan, including statutory documents and court reports.

Fostering to Adopt (F2A)

Durham are actively recruiting adopters who can offer a foster to adopt placement for babies and infants. Research concludes that babies / young children who are in the care system are often moved between carers prior to the courts reaching a decision about who will care for the child in the long term. The move of placements can impact on a child's emotional well-being. Early Permanence Planning and using F2A placements removes the risk of placement moves or disruption by placing a child early with adopters, who are initially approved as adopters who can also foster. If the courts agree a plan of adoption the child remains in placement with a change only from one of fostering placement to one of an adoption placement. To date

Durham have made **12** Foster to Adopt (F2A) Placements which is a fantastic achievement. The feedback from those adopters who have undertaken these placements despite the anxieties is very positive and the service is now having these carers talk to prospective adopters about their experiences.

Service Information - Adoption Recruitment

Adopters' recruitment to approval 1/4/18- 31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
1	1	2	1	5	3	1	2	4	1	3	4	28

Comparison 2017/18 – 21

Adopters matching 1/4/18- 31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
5	3	3	8	9	4	3	3	2	3	2	4	49

Comparison 2017/18 – 44

Summary:

The figures for 2018/19 show there has been an increase in the number of adopters recruited and approved. In 2017/18 there were 21 adopters recruited and approved and this year there have been **28** adopters recruited and approved.

There has also been an increase in the number of adopters matched to children, as there were 44 adopters matched to children in 2017/18 to **49** in 2018/19 (including inter-agency adoptions, 17 were Durham adopters); whilst it is positive, most Local Authorities and or RAA's are seeking interagency placements at a cost, due the shortage of available / suitable adopters. (as noted, Durham Adoption Service spent £863,386 in 2018/19 for interagency placements, an overspend of £629,015).

Service information – Post Adoption Support

After Adoption support**

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
5	6	5	5	5	4	0	5	5	9	4	**	53

** After Adoption North East ceased trading with immediate effect in March 2019.

Children placed for adoption and their families often require additional support over the period of their childhood and Durham has always been a forerunner in the provision of support due to our '**Full Circle Therapeutic Service**'. This team provides bespoke therapeutic interventions in a timely manner. (In 2018/19 Full Circle offered consultations, support or training to **102** prospective adopters / adoptive families).

Adoption support needs are identified early and are evaluated during assessment, matching and placement to achieve positive outcomes for children. Where required additional support from a wide range of services is available. In addition to Full Circle the team may access the support and or advice from the Dedicated Looked After Nurses, Life Story Co-ordinator, and Medical Adviser.

Durham Adoption Service also offer access to informal "buddy" support from approved adopters, for our newly approved adopters.

The Virtual School Service offers a wide range of support, advice and guidance to adopters and professionals with regards to educational issues. Use of Pupil Premium Plus continues to be promoted.

Out of Hours support is available for adopters through the Durham County Council Emergency Duty Team (EDT).

Durham Adoption Allowances 1/4/18-31/3/19

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
0	3	0	1	5	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	11

At **31/3/19** **80 families** were receiving an allowance totalling £770,228.16 per year.

Number of Indirect Contact Arrangements in place

We have 3230 post adoption events in 2018/19 which includes adoption allowance reviews, indirect contact with adopters and 646 birth families involved in post adoption contact managed by Adoption admin which includes birth mothers, birth fathers, grandparents and significant others) and 11 new Adoption Allowances.

Number of referrals to Adoption Support Fund

The Adoption Support Fund has now been available since 2015 to access funds for therapeutic support for adopted children and their families. In the year 2018/19 a total of **£184,783.30** was claimed from the fund for the support of children placed by and within County Durham. During the period 78 applications were made, 5 of these were withdrawn. This resulted in 73 approved applications. Of these 60 were for adopted children and 13 for children subject to a Special Guardianship Order who are also within scope of the fund.

Contact Plans and 'The Post Box'

The Adoption Service operates an efficient and proactive Post Box system. This promotes the exchange of information in accordance with contact plans and agreements to assist the child and birth parents through varying stages of development. There are robust mechanisms to monitor and control information exchanged to safeguard the child and placement. The Adoption Service scan and retain information exchanged between adopters, adopted children and birth family members to have a backup of the information received in the event of this being required.

Life Story Work Consultations

All adopters are offered a consultation with our Life-story Co-ordinator Ingrid Ford at the point of professional's meetings; prior to matching panel. They also meet her at the ICP group.

'Family and Friends of Adopters' Events take place 6 times a year. These events are well received by the friends and families of prospective adopters and the feedback received is excellent.

Birth Records Counselling

When a child reaches the age of 18 they can apply to view their birth records and make an application to DCC. Records are sought and adopted persons are supported to view them either by the adoption team or by our Service level provider. Many of these applications are transferred to our service level provider.

Non-Agency Adoption Applications

Most non-agency adoptions are processed and assessed by an Adoption Social Worker who has extensive experience in this area of work. 4 non-agency adoption orders were granted in 2018/19. This does not reflect the workload as most non-agency adoptions require a significant amount of assessment before it becomes apparent that they will / will not progress.

Regionalisation

The **Regionalising Adoption Guidance** was issued in June 2015. The focus of this was to encourage Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA's) to strengthen their relationships to improve speedier matching of children, improve adopter recruitment and support, and to reduce costs around children looked after, it required all adoption agencies to consider how they can work more closely in their regions.

The **Education and Adoption Act 2016** introduced powers to require Local Authorities and VAA's to join together to form Regional Adoption Agencies (**RAAs**).

The Vision for a Regionalised Adoption System:

'A system where matching is as quick as possible, recruitment is as effective as possible and adoption support quality is high'

Coast to Coast is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) partnership of five Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA), After Adoption, ARC Adoption, Barnardos NE, Caritas Care and DFW Adoption together with Cumbria County Council, Durham County Council and Together for Children Sunderland.

Coast to Coast will deliver high quality, adoption services across the three local authority areas, raising performance to the levels of the highest performing Adoption Agencies and improving outcomes for children across the region.

Within the RAA there will be an opportunity to establish mechanisms to ensure a wider overview of our children who become looked after, opportunities to develop clearer transparency and protocols for Early Permanence Planning for children (EPP) and increased opportunities to share costs and to benefit from economies of scale. Durham's County Council's Adoption Service will continue to be a key partner in working towards the development of the new 'Coast to Coast RAA which is set to go live by April 2020.

Service Objectives

Objectives of the Adoption Service

The Adoption Service is committed to achieving best outcomes through the continual development and delivery of a range of high-quality services via a combination of 'in-house' provision and in partnership with other agencies.

The Adoption Service's key objectives are:

- Ensure that children are placed, with siblings wherever possible, within a timescale that is best for them and without unnecessary delay and are matched and placed with prospective adopters who can meet most, if not all, of their assessed needs.
- To ensure that children live with prospective adopters where they are loved, feel safe and are safe, where their physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted. Where they are able to enjoy their interests, develop confidence and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Where they are supported to achieve their educational potential and where the education and achievements of children is valued and promoted.
- To recruit, prepare and approve prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of looked after children who are to be placed for adoption and who can provide them with a home where the child will feel loved, safe and secure.

- To ensure that the Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations/decisions in line with the over-riding objectives to promote the welfare of children throughout their lives.
- To ensure that contact with birth parents, siblings, other members of the birth family and significant others is arranged and maintained when it is beneficial to the child.
- To ensure that children have clear and appropriate information about themselves, their birth parents and families, and life before their adoption.
- To support birth parents and birth families to take an active part in the planning and implementation of their child's adoption, wherever possible.
- To ensure that children and adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their adoption support needs and are provided with the services to meet those needs.
- To ensure that adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to their adoption, where appropriate, and contact is facilitated between an adopted adult and their birth relatives if that is what both parties want.
- To ensure that children, prospective adopters and adopters are clear about the aims and objectives of the adoption service and what service and facilities it provides.
- To ensure that children's cultural and identity needs are met by promoting equality and diversity in the approach with all service users.
- To ensure that The Adoption Service is informed and developed in accordance with the views of children, young people, and their birth and adoptive families.
- To ensure that children and service users receive a service from staff, managers, volunteers, panel members and decision-makers who are carefully selected, trained, supported and managed to deliver an efficient and effective service.
- To ensure that allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support of children, the person making the allegation, and at the same time support the person who is subject of the allegation.
- To ensure that records are clear, accurate, up to date and stored securely, and contribute to an understanding of a child's life.

Service Priorities 2019/20

The Adoption Service “Statement of Purpose” 2018/19 sets out the aims and objectives of the team. The main priorities of The Adoption Service will continue to focus on Family finding Recruitment & Assessment, and Post Adoption Support.

- The priority of the Adoption Service is to make and sustain stable adoption placements and to ensure that the lifelong needs of those affected by adoption are met.

- The Adoption Service continues to have a clear focus on recruitment in an ever-competitive market place and are concentrating on developing a robust Recruitment Strategy suitable for the current situation moving into 2020. This will hopefully enable the recruitment of enough adopters to meet the needs of children who have a plan of adoption. Therefore, the recruitment & assessment of adopters will be prioritised and targeted in order that in-house resources are available locally and within the region for children who need adoption placements. This will be directly linked to the needs of children with a plan of adoption.
- Family Finding will continue to be proactive to provide placement choice and to avoid unnecessary delays in placing children in new families. To do this, children are allocated a Family Finder on referral to the Adoption Service, so their needs can be considered, and they can be featured appropriately. This will allow every child with a plan of adoption to have the greatest opportunity to be matched with an adoptive family who can meet their needs throughout their lives as soon as possible.
- Plans are progressing to Regionalise with our geographical neighbours Together for Children (Sunderland), Cumbria and Durham to form a new Regional Adoption Agency- Coast to Coast. The plan is that the new organisation will be hosted by Cumbria County Council. It is anticipated that the new delivery model will be operational from April 2020. Durham County Council's Adoption Service will therefore become part of the Coast to Coast RAA by April 2020.

Summary and Conclusion

Children remain the focus of everything that we do. The Adoption Service continues to concentrate on achieving the best outcomes for children. We aim to prevent delay in achieving permanence for the child with a plan of adoption.

The past year has brought new challenges, reflected nationally including:

- The increase nationally in the numbers of children with a plan of adoption.
- The decrease in the numbers of people coming forward to adopt leading to a nationwide search for suitable families for most children with a plan of adoption in Durham.
- The continued increase in the number of adopters who do not feel they have the necessary skills to consider children with complex needs.

There will be more challenges ahead in 2019/20 for the Adoption Service and the Adoption Panel.

The key priority areas to continue in the new financial year remain:

- The drive to match and place children with adoption plans swiftly.
- A commitment to continue to develop early permanence for children.
- The continued recruitment of adoptive carers to meet the needs of Durham children so that these children can be placed locally with their prospective adopters without undue delay.
- The continued assessment of adopters within timescales.

Karen Robb

Strategic Manager for Looked after Children and Permanence