



Durham County Council

Adoption Service 6 Monthly Report

1 April – 30 September 2020

Adopt with us



Durham County Council Adoption Service

This report covers a period of unprecedented change due to the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic and the national and local restrictions which followed. The Adoption Team rose to the challenge of not only maintaining performance but significantly improving it and utilised the amended Adoption Regulations in respect of the Stage 1 process to their full advantage. Each aspect of the prospective adopters' journey was reviewed, and a virtual alternative was developed and the highlights of this were the Information, counselling and preparation courses and the Adoption Panels.

One of our prospective adopters said

“Overwhelmingly positive. Huge congratulations to you all for adapting so well to the ‘new normal’.

Staffing Updates

- Paula Gibbons remained the Adoption Team Manager and Adoption Agency Advisor for this period alongside commencing the RAA Head of Service post on the 1st September 2020.
- External recruitment for the Adoption Team Manager vacancy did not attract an adoption experienced candidate therefore an internal secondment opportunity has been circulated to the current adoption staff for expressions of interest.
- The Adoption Team has recruited to 1 full time vacant post in this period and this experienced member of staff joined the team on the 16th September. A part time vacancy arose following a member of staff seeking to reduce hours as part of a phased retirement plan and a full time 1 year internal secondment has been agreed with a proposed start date at the beginning of November.

Adopters Journey

Recruitment

- In this period, there have been 46 initial enquiries and 24 initial visits (the majority via Teams). Though this figure is a reduction on the same period last year the conversion rate from enquiry to visit is 52% which is very positive as it evidences that communication and marketing activity is reaching those families who are ready to start their adoption journey.
- Due to COVID-19, information sessions were halted and did not recommence in this period. Due to the volume of work the Adoption Team did not immediately offer these virtually, however at the end of this reporting period they had commenced and the first held in September attracted 2 families. The format follows the face to face ones and includes contributions from approved adopters.

Stage 1

- Information, counselling and preparation courses (ICP) continued to be held during this reporting period. I am pleased to report that the nominated adoption staff quickly

developed a Teams friendly version, including videos of those who would usually attend the sessions for example the Medical Advisor, Panel Chair etc. In this reporting period, 28 families have attended the preparation courses. Due to COVID-19 and initial challenges for Together for Children in using Teams the sharing of preparation training has been temporarily paused.

- Within this period, the Team added the Fostering for Adoption course into the main preparation sessions, so all families now receive this input to help them make an informed decision about offering this type of early permanence placement. Prior to this change in delivery 10 families attended the training.

The Social Work Consultant said

We considered the challenges that may lie ahead including access to technology, or participants for whom English may not be their first language. We recognised the different ways people learn and made the training fully interactive with discussions and activities. We continue to develop the training in order to prepare adopters for what is an ever changing picture. The training has been delivered to 5 groups of prospective adopters and the feedback we have received has been outstandingly positive.

Stage 2

- In this reporting period, 25 adopters were approved, which is equal to the number approved in 2019/20. The target of 31 will be achieved within the next 2 months.
- At the end of this reporting period, there were 5 prospective adopters in Stage 1 and 8 prospective adopters in Stage 2.

Panel

- Panel continues to operate within the regulatory framework, and it is extremely positive to note that it has moved from paper to electronic to virtual and the feedback from attendees has been wholly positive.

Our prospective adopters said

“A very easy process via Teams in these circumstances of COVID was very smooth”

“Having a virtual Panel meant we were more comfortable and would allow for a more relaxed experience”.

- Each Panel Member had their annual appraisal in April 2020. Panel Members said

“I have a much better understanding of the whole adoption process”

“It is immensely rewarding to see children matched with adoptive families”

- Panel have received Microsoft Teams training and Fostering for Adoption training in this period. Panel are always keen to understand the process for Prospective Adopters and Full Circle have shared the resources prospective adopters receive with the Panel Members. In the appraisal process, understanding of life story activity; the

tools used with direct work with children and the life story book produced and the attachment training offered to prospective adopters were highlighted as areas for training in 2020/21.

Child's Journey

- In this reporting period 29 children had an ADM decision for a plan of adoption; this is a significant reduction on the 77 in 2019/20.
- 13 children have been granted a Placement Order which is a significant reduction on the 66 in 2019/20. This is not a surprising decrease, and this is the experience nationally.
- 28 children have been matched at Panel; which is a tremendous achievement in this period and only slightly less than half of the 2019/20 total of 64. Of the 28 children, 13 were placed with external providers at a cost of £390,344
- 19 Adoption Orders have been achieved, which is less than half the 2019/20 figure of 55, which is understandable given the delays in Court processes.
- 40 children are placed with prospective adopters but not yet adopted so if these Adoption Orders are achieved before the 31st March 2021 then last year's figure will be improved upon. Of this 40, 18 children have been placed under 10 weeks, 11 have not yet had applications lodged and 11 are in process within the Court.
- 4 children's plans (2 groups of brothers and sisters) changed away from adoption after the Placement Order was granted all were as a result of family finding not being successful due to their complex needs.
- In this period 4 children experienced a disruption, 1 whilst in introductions, and 3 (two sisters and a single boy) after placement. 3 of the 4 children were matched with prospective adopters approved by other agencies. The Agency learning from disruptions is enhanced by a disruption meeting chaired by an independent person and despite every effort being made to try to secure an independent Chairperson this has been unsuccessful due to the lack of availability of trained and experienced practitioners. However, an internal practice review has been utilised and the learning from this has highlighted clarity around communication, key decisions to be followed up in writing and a holistic consideration of the support needs of single adopters. The issue of lack of Chairpersons will be addressed by training for relevant Durham County Council staff to fulfil this role.

Family Finding

- There have been no further changes to processes for the family finding. The RAA profiling events have moved to a virtual format and this has been positively received.
- The previous use of Fostering for Adoption by Durham has continued to be slow to improve and, in this period, only 1 more baby was placed with a Fostering for Adoption Carer. So far this year 3 children have been placed in this way. However, improvement in performance is being championed at a strategic level through the revision of the Early Permanence Strategy and awareness raising sessions scheduled for early 2021.

Post Adoption Support

- There have been staffing challenges for Business Support in managing the Postbox arrangements and unfortunately this has led to complaints.
- The review of adoption allowances continues, and it is expected that an outcome will be known by early 2021.
- At the end of this reporting period the Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA) role transferred to Paula Gibbons and once the Adoption Team Manager is permanently appointed this role will transfer to the new postholder.
- The Adoption Team have had 38 contacts for post adoption support in this reporting period. Of this number, 30 had an assessment of support needs and 27 have had applications to ASF completed. This clearly evidences the increasing nature of this aspect of adoption work and it is nationally acknowledged as a growing area of work.

Post Adoption Support Services

Due to capacity issues within the Adoption Team a Service Level Agreement continues to be in place with ARC Adoption NE for the provision independent adoption support to deliver the following functions:

- To provide support, advice and counselling to birth parents and those who are affected by adoption.
- To assist and advise adopted adults on how to gain access to their birth records.

There is an annual cost of £40K and the extension was agreed until 31st March 2021.

Non-Agency Adoption

The number of referrals and complexities of this area of adoption work are increasing. In this reporting period there have been:

- 32 enquiries, this is a significant increase as this is only 3 less than the whole of the previous year.
- 4 initial visits were completed, and this small number is due to national and local restrictions during this period.

This is a significant increase in a statutory area of adoption practice which is so specialised it is undertaken by a named part time Adoption Social Worker. Should these progress to assessments then this will be a significant allocation challenge.

Complaints

In this reporting period the Service received 1 complaint in respect of practice with the Adoption Team and Permanence Team. It was upheld in part and practice has been reviewed as a result of it.

Update on Key priority areas for 2020/21:

- To develop the ethos of the team recognising that newly appointed staff will soon join. *Ongoing, however remote working has impacted on the development of relationships for new staff members.*
- To develop a learning culture within the Team that supports a wide-ranging review of practice with the goal of updating and improving practice to increase in house provision in preparation for a partnership RAA Model. *An enquiring and learning culture are more in evidence and the improvement in practice is substantial.*
- To review the current Early Permanence Planning practice across other areas to embed models of early permanence for example Fostering for Adoption. *This continues to be developed.*
- Develop and launch training package for the Family and Friends of prospective adopters. *The development of support sessions has met this need and is being positively received by Panel.*
- Review and develop LCS to support practice and aide reporting on performance. *There has been a delay in this commencing however dates are now agreed for reviewing the current provision.*
- Provide written reports twice yearly; April-September and October-March as required by 25.6 of the National Minimum Standards (2011). *In place.*
- Review adoption allowances procedure and embed a means test approach. *This is ongoing.*
- Review and realign the ASSA role alongside developing the Post Adoption Support offer directly from the Adoption Team. *Achieved.*

Paula Gibbons

RAA Head of Service

1st November 2020