



**Durham County Council**

**Adoption Service Annual Report**

**1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021**

**Adopt with us**



## **Durham County Council Adoption Service**

- The Head of Children's Social Care is Helen Fergusson.
- The Strategic Manager role of Agency Decision Maker (ADM) transferred to Jodie Henderson in February 2021 in her role as the Strategic Manager for Children Looked After and Permanence.
- Paula Gibbons was in role as the Adoption Team Manager until September 2020 when she took up her role as Head of Service for Adopt Coast to Coast. Following interim arrangements Barbara Arbon joined Durham in March 2020 as the permanent Adoption Team Manager. The Adoption Team Manager continues to be the Adoption Agency Advisor to the Panel.
- The Children Looked After Team 3, Team Manager continues to act as the Adoption Agency Advisor in respect of children's cases.
- The new staff appointed in the previous reporting period joined the Team and following a resignation further recruitment was necessary. The Adoption Team had permission to utilise the staffing budget underspend to offer a secondment opportunity to an internal candidate, which resulted in a half post (18.5 hrs) being over complement.
- A business case to increase staff numbers was approved and 2 full time social work posts and a Family Support Worker post were created. As this period concludes newly recruited staff are due to join in April 2021.
- Once fully staffed the Adoption Team will consist of a Team Manager, 2 Social Work Consultants, 10 (WTE) Social Workers, 1 (FT) Family Support Worker and be supported by dedicated business support for the Stage 1 process and the Adoption Panel.
- The Statement of Purpose was updated in March 2021 to reflect the Regional Adoption Agency and shared with the Adoption Team Manager and Strategic Manager for internal review, approval and publication. As per the The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, it is a statutory requirement that an amended copy is provided to OFSTED within 28 days of any amendment and included on the Adoption Service's website. This published report highlights the aims and objectives of the Adoption Service therefore they are not repeated in this report.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

- The following achievements and challenges are within the context of an unprecedented period of time. It is to the credit of the staff of the Adoption Team and Panel Members that business was transferred to a virtual platform via Teams so quickly that performance remained high.

### **Adopters Journey**

**(Please refer to the dashboard in appendix 1 of this report)**

## Recruitment

- Initial enquiries reduced significantly from 164 in 2019/20 to 100 in this reporting period. However, the conversation rate from enquiry to approval remained at 41%.
- Monthly information drop in sessions were moved to Teams and this allowed them to be held later in the evening and weekend sessions were introduced. Ten information sessions were held, and 26 households attended. Though this is a decrease on the 62 households from 2019/20, attendance at this aspect of practice is optional and some families prefer to arrange an initial visit.
- 51 initial visits were completed, a small decrease of the 5 in the previous year. The majority of these were completed via Teams and this was not reported as a disadvantage by enquirers or staff. This is a conversion rate of 51% from enquiry, a significant increase from 34% in 2019/20.

## Stage 1

- A named business support officer had responsibility for the Stage 1 process with the support of the Team Manager during this period. However, following a review of process at the end of this reporting period, the previous practice of cases being allocated to a Social Worker in Stage 1 is being reintroduced.
- Information, counselling, and preparation courses (ICP) have generally been held monthly. Due to the move to Teams on 1 May, the arrangement with Together for Children was suspended as their staff group did not initially have access to Teams. In this period 7 ICP courses have been facilitated and 35 families have attended, this is a significant increase on 19 families in the previous year.
- The Full Circle Therapeutic Team continue to support the work of all those working with children who have a plan of adoption. Day 4 of the ICP course for Durham prospective adopters is delivered by Full Circle and this supports our prospective adopters in beginning their journey by truly understanding the needs of children who require an adoptive placement and how they can parent therapeutically. Prior to a match being considered by the Panel the prospective adopters have a consultation with a member of Full Circle and this is highly valued and positively viewed by prospective adopters.
- The changes to practice following Adopt Coast to Coast going live on 1 April will be highlighted in the next bi-annual report.

## Stage 2

- In this reporting period, 41 prospective adopters were approved, which is an increase on the 25 the previous year. At the end of this period, 1 prospective adoptive family did not have their approval recommended by the Panel. As the ADM was minded to agree with the Panel recommendation a 'qualifying determination' letter was sent. The outcome of this will be reported in the next report.
- In this period there was no income generation from Durham approved prospective adopters being utilised by other Local Authorities.
- The success of closer monitoring of the assessment which Adoption Social Workers complete in Stage 2 resulted in all assessments meeting the statutory 4-month

timescale which is from the date the Stage 2 agreement is signed by the prospective adopters to the ADM decision on their suitability to adopt.

- The Quality Assurance Visit introduced in the previous period and completed by the Team Manager at the completion of mainstream adoption assessments continue to be well received and valued by the prospective adopters and staff. The written reports from these visits continued to be positively commented on by Panel Members and the ADM.
- At the end of this period, there were 9 prospective adopters in Stage 2 and 13 prospective adopters in Stage 1; this is potentially 22 families who will complete their adoption journey in 2021/22.
- The annual number of children who have a plan of adoption agreed through the Court requires the Adoption Team to at least maintain the number of approved prospective adopters. The goal set for performance in 2020/21 was 31 and it is positive to highlight that this was exceeded by 10 prospective adopters.

## **Panel**

- There were 27 Adoption Panel meetings held during the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 an increase of 1 on the previous year.
- A named business support officer continues to serve as the Adoption Panel Administrator for the fortnightly Panels. In this role she is involved from the ADM agreeing a child has a plan of adoption (as she is responsible for the statutory letters to birth parents) through to the post Panel administrative process. This is a crucial role in the performance of the Adoption Team and she was instrumental in supporting the Panel to move from paperless to virtual in a month as the Adoption Service responded to the practice restrictions of COVID-19.
- The Adoption Panel Independent Chairs, Agency Medical Advisors and Independent Panel Members continue to contribute to the training and preparation courses for prospective adopters. In this period 2 new Medical Advisors joined the Panel following the retirement of the previous postholder.
- Elected Members were represented on the Adoption Panel by 2 Councillors. New Elected Member representation is being sought following the 2021 elections.
- Following a review of the Central List process by the Team Manager, the Annual Appraisals for the Adoption Panel Members have been realigned to April, so all appraisals are completed at the same time.
- Two training opportunities were extended to Panel in this period: Fostering for Adoption Training and Lifestory work.

## **Child's Journey**

- In this reporting period 74 children had an ADM decision for a plan of adoption which was a small decrease of 3 on the previous year.
- 58 were granted a Placement Order, a decrease of 8 on the previous year.
- 60 children have been matched at Panel. Though this is a decrease of 4 on the previous year, it remains an increase on the previous periods. Of the 60 children, 42 were placed with inhouse prospective adopters and 18 in interagency placements. This is a significant improving picture over the last 2 years; the ratio of in house to

interagency placements has improved from 2019/20 when it was 26 inhouse as against 38 interagency.

- Actual gross expenditure on inter agency adoption placements has significantly decreased from £1.268 million in 2019-20 to £0.491 million.
- 47 Adoption Orders have been achieved, which is a decrease of 8 on the previous year.
- 46 children placed with their prospective adopters in this period had not been secured via the granting of an Adoption Order at 31 March 2021.
- 10 children's plans (4 groups of 2 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.
- The Adoption Service are starting the new reporting period 2020/21 with 27 children with an ADM decision, 31 with a Placement Order (14 of whom do not have a link) and 1 of these children have waited over 6 months for a match.
- A practice review completed in the last period resulted in a reduction of the number of days for a child to be matched from the granting of the Placement Order.
- Due to the increasing number of children who have plans for adoption agreed by the court, approval for the adoption service staffing complement to increase the number of in house adopters was approved as the reliance on Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) is not only expensive but more importantly children experience drift and delay which ultimately impacts on the outcomes once permanency is achieved. Of note, the interagency fee is increasing from £32,063 to £32,320 in April 2021 for families bought from VAA's, whilst the local authority rate continues to remain static at £27,000.

## **Family Finding**

- The allocation of a family finder once a Placement Order was granted continued in this period and through the oversight of the responsible Social Work Consultant this did not negatively impact on timescales for achieving a match. As the Adoption Service had more in house prospective adopters, and the responsibility for the match was allocated to the assessing social worker, this created more time for the 2 family finders to concentrate on those children whose needs could not be met within Durham's resources.
- Where children cannot be matched with in house prospective adopters, the family finders use a range of resources to identify a suitable external match. In line with best practice, where possible children remain in the North East as this ensures services and support is more readily available.
- In the RAA partnership which includes 4 VAA's, practice had to change to offer virtual profiling events rather than face to face. In 2020/21 there were 3 held; a decrease of 1 on the previous year. Where a Placement Order has not been achieved the children's information is anonymised as is that of the prospective adopters still in assessment. In respect of children, Durham only share the details of children where no in house link is achievable. From these events only 2 children were linked and both progressed to a match, an increase of 1 on the previous year.
- The concern raised in the previous period that not all of the VAAs were consistent in their engagement in the bi-monthly family finding meetings, was resolved. However,

the families available across the VAAs was not sufficient for all of the Durham children and 11 of the 18 placed via interagency were not placed with the 4 local VAAs.

- In the absence of local resources, the Family Finders have relied heavily on Linkmaker a national portal utilised by all Local Authorities and RAA's.
- No RAA partnership Activity Days were held in 2020/21 due to COVID-19 restrictions.
- The previous use of Fostering for Adoption by Durham has significantly slowed down and in this period only 5 babies were placed with a Fostering for Adoption Carer, 2 of the 5 prospective adopters were approved by Durham. The need to ensure all children who are suitable for a Fostering for Adoption placement have this consistency considered as part of care planning is acknowledged and the review and amendment of the Early Permanence Strategy and the 3 staff awareness raising sessions offered at the end of this reporting period are hoped to improve this area of performance.
- The majority of children with care plans of adoption and who are placed with prospective adopters have enjoyed stability and security in their new permanent families. The official categorisation of a disruption for the statutory return is where a pre-adoptive placement ends before the Adoption Order is granted. In this period there was 1 disruption of 2 sisters placed with a prospective adopter assessed by another Local Authority. A disruption meeting was held and chaired by a Durham Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). Though not classified as a disruption a placement did not proceed beyond the introductions phase of a single child with a prospective adopter assessed by a VAA. A multi-agency meeting was held to consider the learning from this case.

## **Post Adoption Support**

- Due to staff absence, the business support dedicated to the Postbox arrangements was inconsistent in the first part of the year. However, since Summer 2020, an additional Business Support Team Leader has been working with colleagues to move the management of this critical aspect of adoption practice to Liquid Logic. The learning from complaints has resulted in significant changes to working practices. In recognition of the challenges, an Adoption Social Worker had their caseload changed temporarily to support the continued development of systems and review procedures with Business Support colleagues to improve the experience of Postbox for adopted children, their adoptive parents and birth families.
- We have 759 birth families involved in post adoption contact and as this service is provided until a child reaches 18 and is one of the few aspects of post adoption support that remains with the child's local authority, this number will continue to grow.
- Currently 66 families are receiving an adoption allowance with an associated budget of £0.827 million. This small reduction from £0.879 in 2019/20 is a result of the consistent approach introduced in regard to adoptive family's outgoings which has in some cases resulted in the family no longer receiving a payment.
- Due to national restrictions no face to face social events have been facilitated in this period. Adopt Coast to Coast hosted a September event for adopters across the region and the opportunity to run events alongside the other spokes will be considered in due course.
- The Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA) role is now held by the Adoption Team Manager.

- Successful applications to Adoption Support Fund (ASF) have increased from 100 in 2019/20 to 128 in this reporting period. This increase is indicative of an improving Post Adoption Support offer wholly managed within the Adoption Service.
- The funding received from ASF in 2020/21 was £0.337 million an increase of £0.053 million.
- Though adoptive family's location and their choice of therapeutic resource does mean that Full Circle are not the only provider funded by ASF, they remain most used. It is positive to note that in this reporting period they have retained their percentage (59%) of the successful applications.

### **Post Adoption Support Services**

In reviewing the in house offer, a decision was reached not to commence a re-tendering process for the Service Level Agreement (SLA) in place with a local VAA. The funding associated with this SLA is going to be utilised for a Family Support Worker post who will be part of the staff group delivering 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.

This post is yet to be appointed to.

### **Non-Agency Adoption**

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

- 61 enquiries which is a significant increase on the 35 in the previous reporting period
- 2 initial visits is a significant decrease on the previous 16, however this is as a direct result to changes in working and the recognised importance of face to face initial visits. This was a practice decision and took account of the Courts decision not to accept non-agency adoption applications due to the need to prioritise Care Proceedings. It is positive to note that enquirers have been accepting of the delay.
- 9 Adoption Orders granted
- 2 assessments completed but applications not submitted to Court
- 4 completed assessment in part heard proceedings
- 5 assessments currently underway

Most of this work is undertaken by a named part time Adoption Social Worker and allocations to other Adoption Social Workers have had mixed results due to a combination of the complexity of the work and the confidence of those undertaking it for the first time in a long time.

### **Complaints**

In this reporting period the Service received 2 complaints involving the Adoption Service and the Children's Permanency Team. They were upheld in part and necessary aspects of practice were amended as required. One of the complaints is proceeding to Stage 2 of the complaints process and any additional learning will be shared with the relevant staff across the Children and Young People's directorate.

## Regional Adoption Agency

Adopt Coast to Coast launched on 1 April 2021. Cumbria County Council, Durham County Council and Together for Children/Sunderland are the spokes that continue to deliver their local authorities statutory adoption functions. They do so under the coordination and support of a Head of Service who has have overall responsibility for quality management and practice oversight. The recruitment and associated activity which includes the website, Facebook etc is managed in the Hub by a dedicated Communications and Marketing Officer.

The shared vision -

*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.*

## Update on 2020/21 priorities

Priority	Update	Progress
To develop the ethos of the team recognising that newly appointed staff will soon join.	Remote working has impacted on the development of relationships for new staff members.	Ongoing
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 has been more in evidence over the last year and the improvement in practice is substantial.	Ongoing
To review the current Early Permanence Planning practice across other areas to embed models of early permanence for example Fostering for Adoption.	The strategy has been reviewed and staff engagement sessions completed. Practice will continue to be monitored so opportunities for children to be placed sooner are not missed.	Ongoing
Develop and launch training package for the Family and Friends of prospective adopters.	The development of individualised family support sessions has met this need and is being positively received by Panel.	Completed
Review and develop Liquid Logic to support practice and aide reporting on performance.	There was a delay in this commencing, however the development and testing has been completed and staff training/support is underway.	Nearing completion
Provide written reports twice yearly; April-September and October-March as required by 25.6 of the National Minimum Standards (2011).	Service Reports provided by Adoption Team Manager as required by statutory guidance.	Completed
Review adoption allowances procedure and embed a means test approach.	The review and consultation was completed in early 2021. However, the commencement of the new	Ongoing

	practice model was temporarily paused.	
Review and realign the ASSA role alongside developing the Post Adoption Support (PAS) offer directly from the Adoption Team.	The expertise of the new staff in PAS has enabled significant progress in a short timeframe.	Completed

**Key priority areas for 2021/22:**

- Panel Chairs annual report to be provided. As this has not previously been completed a 6 monthly one may be helpful in the next reporting period.
- To work collaboratively with our partners in Adopt Coast to Coast to recruit, assess and approve adopters in a timely manner.
- To ensure children’s plans of permanence via adoption are progressed without delay.
- Fostering for adoption placements and matches are to be identified at the earliest possible stage in children’s planning to prevent delay and ensure minimal moves for children.
- To recruit new panel members to the central list. This will ensure quoracy and prevent the possible need to stand a panel down due to lack of available panel members.
- To embed signs of safety into practice and panel processes in line with the Durham model of social work practice.
- To increase relationship based practice with trauma informed service developments, particularly in the development and support of post adoption contact.

Paula Gibbons

Head of Service, Adopt Coast to Coast

14 May 2021

Barbara Arbon

Adoption Team Manager

14 May 2021

Appendix 1 – Adopters Journey Dashboard



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