



Durham County Council
Adoption Service Annual Report
1 April 2021 – 31st March 2022



Durham County Council Adoption Service

This annual report covers all adoption activity within Durham County Council, a spoke within the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt Coast to Coast. This is a partnership 'hub and spoke' model between Durham, Cumbria, and Together for Children in Sunderland.

The Statement of Purpose for Durham Adoption Service was updated in August 2021 and a copy was provided to OFSTED as per the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003. The Statement of Purpose will be reviewed and updated annually.

Adoption National Minimum Standards 25.6 (2011) states that written reports are provided on the management, outcomes, and financial state of the Agency every six months. A report was submitted in Autumn 2021 covering April to September 2021. This report takes into account the full financial year, 1st April 2021 to March 31st 2022.

It should be noted that during this 12-month period two significant issues have been raised in respect of adoption nationally, both having a significant impact for children, adopters, and staff.

Ombudsman finding regarding Wolverhampton - In June 2021 a complaint was lodged against Wolverhampton Council by a person who in 2019 had their application to adopt turned down. The complaint related to procedures not being followed at the enquiry stage and an initial visit being undertaken before the registration of interest was submitted. Adoption agencies nationally have needed to review practice in this area. Durham reviewed these procedures immediately. This led to an increase in work, due to no longer being able to rule any potential unsuitable applicants out at the initial point of contact. There are only 3 situations for ruling out now at this stage being;

- Applicants must be over 21 years of age
- Applicants must be legally resident in the UK, the Channel Islands, or the Isle of Man, and have been so for at least 12 months.
- Applicants must not have any criminal convictions or cautions for offences against children or for serious sexual offences.

As a result, a greater number of enquiries are now progressed to initial visits and detailed information is requested from the applicant at this stage, before a decision can be made regarding suitability to progress.

The Somerset Judgement- On 24 November the High Court handed down a judgement in *Somerset County Council v NHS Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group & Anor* [2021] EWHC 3004(Fam) dealing with the lawfulness of Placement Orders made in ten separate cases. The court found that the Agency Decision Maker

(ADM) had not made the decision that the child should be placed for adoption in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations (AAR) 2005.

In these cases the Medical Adviser had not completed the Child's Permanence Report as required by Regulations 15 & 17 of the AAR 2005. She had not given advice on whether the child needed to have a medical examination and had not written a summary of the state of the child's health. The Court found that the breach of the Regulations was so fundamental that it could render the application for a Placement Order invalid.

It should be noted many other Local Authorities nationally also worked in the same way. Durham Adoption Service had adopted this practice in August 2020.

Resolution of this matter has caused delays for children waiting to be matched with prospective adopters. Family finding continued, however children were not able to have chemistry visits with adopters and other than in exceptional circumstances which needed to be agreed by ADM, could not be placed with their adopters.

Adoption panels in February 2022 where matches were being presented, needed to be stood down. Local Authorities were given permission by Court to place some children with their prospective adopters in exceptional circumstances, which Durham was able to do for 8 children, following agreement and review of medical reports by the Agency Decision Maker.

Durham Adoption Team Staffing

- The Head of Children's Services is Helen Fergusson.
- The Head of Adopt Coast to Coast is Paula Gibbons.
- The Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is Jodie Henderson. In the absence of Jodie Henderson, Jac Tyler and Bernie Toomey, both DCC Strategic Managers, have undertaken the role of ADM once each over this year.
- Barbara Arbon is the Adoption Team Manager and Adoption Agency Advisor. In the absence of Barbara Arbon, Sarah Fitzpatrick and Wendy Ellis, both Adoption Social Work Consultants, have undertaken the Agency Panel Adviser role.
- 2x Consultant Social Workers.
- 7x full time social workers.
- 4x part time social workers.

- 1x 4 day week social worker.
- 1x Adoption support worker.
- 3 x student social workers have been provided with placements within the team over this period. One of which was a Durham County Council employee on a social work apprenticeship.
- The Adoption Team has recruited to 1 Full time Social Worker post within this period. This post was successfully filled by an experienced social worker who at that time was on a 1-year secondment with the Adoption Team. The worker moved to the permanent post on 24th May 2021. 1 part time vacant Social Worker post was also recruited in this period and this experienced member of staff joined the team on the 27th September 2021.
- 2 adoption panel chairs are independently employed. Barbara Brelsford and Sandie Dixon. Mary Greenwood, panel chair retired after many years' service in September 2021. Sandie Dixon was successfully recruited in this vacant post.
- Due to a significant increase in work across all areas of the adoption service it has been necessary to implement a new duty process. Duty is now covered by a main duty worker along with a backup duty worker Monday to Friday 8.30am – 5pm, 4.30pm on Fridays. There is also now an initial visit rolling rota, which allows a fair dissemination of such visits and stage 1 allocations across the team.

Recruitment

- In this period, DCC have received 217 initial enquires, of which 62 Initial visits were carried out. This is a significant increase from the previous year of 115 initial enquiries resulting in 46 initial visits.
- 30 Information sessions have been held via Teams and facilitated equally across the 3 spokes of the RAA, each undertaking 10 sessions. There has been a flexible approach to the timing of the events, including evenings and Saturdays.

Below are some quotes from attendees at the information events facilitated by Durham's Adoption Team.

- *"I came out of the meeting feeling absolutely invigorated about the journey we're about to take. Being able to listen to people with so much knowledge and talk to other people about to do the same thing was very exciting!"*
- *It was all very positive, and information was provided in an easy to understand way*
- *We felt good and encouraged to proceed with our application.*
- *I think the organisation was really well done. There was a clear structure, lots of valuable information presented very clearly and inviting a person to talk about their experiences with the adoption process was really insightful*
- *Clear, mostly. The presenter, gave a coherent step -by-step overview which I found very useful*
- *Hearing from an adopter was great. She was very positive about her experience which was encouraging. They were both lovely. It's so hard to host on Zoom. They did everything they could but people are never going to feel as relaxed as they would in person.*

Stage 1

Information, counselling, and preparation courses (ICP) have been delivered monthly on a shared basis between Durham and TFC adoption teams. The training takes place over 3 full consecutive days. Durham facilitates the training on alternate months. This provides geographical ease for attendees, however, when necessary, Durham & TFC applicants are able to attend Cumbria courses and vice versa.

In this period Durham adoption staff have facilitated the training for 76 applicants. From February 2022 Durham re-commenced face to face ICP training. Prior to this Teams was used due to covid restrictions.

Feedback from attendees at the ICP training;

- *Thank you for the way in which you conducted the training. I did not feel at all uncomfortable to ask questions and really felt at ease.*

- *Eye opening and informative throughout and that can only ever be a good thing to help with everything going forward.*
- *The session went really well. It was nice to meet other people who are going through the same process as us and share our ideas and thoughts with them. xxx, who delivered the training, was lovely and was clearly experienced, which was reassuring. The training was fun and interactive, whilst still providing us with things we needed to know and there was plenty of opportunities to ask questions.*
- *Informative, interactive, believe was a good session. Helpful in understanding certain things which we weren't too sure about. Also covered things which never thought about to. Nice to be part of a group in same position.*
- *Was good and covered wide range of issues which had never considered. Shone a light on why certain things can be important to the child future knowledge and links to their past.*
- *The session was great, very informative but with a relaxed atmosphere, so we didn't feel too overwhelmed with everything. We liked how there were lots of opportunities to ask questions and have discussions.*
- *The videos from the foster carer, adopted young lady and medical advisor were great. It was good to hear their experiences and thoughts on adopting.*

Stage 2

In this reporting period, 40 adoptive households were approved. At the end of this reporting period, there were 22 prospective adopters in Stage 1 and 20 prospective adopters in Stage 2.

During stage 2 prospective adopters are invited to attend a training session providing information about Fostering for Adoption (FFA). It is acknowledged as a required area for development and growth as this provides the greatest opportunity for children to experience a reduced number of care givers, although it does carry a degree of emotional risk for adopters.

This session allows for more detailed exploration of the process. The session provides clear, well-balanced advice and information on the benefits of FFA for both child and adopter. This training is well received, and adopters are fully aware that attendance at the session does not mean they must undertake FFA. Adopters have felt able to progress with FFA but have not restricted themselves solely to this pathway to being matched with a child.

The therapeutic parenting training, which is mandatory has been delivered during stage 2. Earlier in the year this was held in stage 1, however after feedback from prospective adopters this has been moved to stage 2 to prevent prospective adopters feeling overwhelmed with information.

Adoption Panel/Independent Reviewing Mechanism

Adoption Panel has been held 23 times over this 12-month period. Panel is held fortnightly and additional panels held when necessary to prevent delays for children. 5 of the 23 panels held were additional panels.

At these panels 59 matches for children with adopters and 39 adopter approvals were considered.

Within this cohort only 1 adoption application for approval in April 2021 was not recommended by panel. This was supported by ADM. In November 2021 this was presented at the applicants request to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM). IRM also felt unable to recommend the applicants be approved as adopters. ADM supported the IRM decision.

Panel members and chairs have noted throughout the year that the reports presented to them are of an extremely high quality and very child focussed. This is fed back to social worker, their managers and senior managers. Panel have said that they felt so reassured by the detail within some prospective adopter's reports (PARs) that they have found it a challenge to identify questions to ask adopters during their panel attendance, saying that this is reflective of the quality of the reports.

In respect of training for panel members and chairs, Barbara Arbon, has provided a variety of literature, research, practice updates and information to each member/chair via email throughout the year. Any such information is discussed in AOB at the end of panel.

Panel have also received a face-to-face training day in this period held together with the RAA partners.

Panel Members had their annual appraisals in April 2021.

There has been a continued drive to recruit new panel members. A priority for future recruitment will be to ensure panel has a good range of diversity within the central list.

2 elected members stepped down from their panel elected member status during this year but remained on panel as independent members. To date no new elected members have come into this role.

5 new panel members have been successfully recruited in this period. 1 panel member resigned due to personal circumstances and the 2 panel medical advisors remain on to provide medical information but have resigned as full panel members due to work commitments and availability.

Adopters feedback

Recently 2 approved adoptive families with Durham County Council provided the following feedback (professionals names have been removed)

1. *“Adopt Coast To Coast have been very supportive throughout the whole process of adopting second time around.*

The social worker has been such a help and support for us as a couple and as a family. She has a very professional, friendly, and caring attitude. Nothing is too much trouble for her, no matter how stupid some of my questions may have been. Knowing she was always a phone call or email away helped a lot. Even if she was unsure of something she always came back to me after checking with one of her colleagues.

There have been so many changes in the adoption process since we adopted our first child six years ago. One huge change was the opportunity to have a chemistry meeting with the child and foster carer prior to being approved/matched. This was a great chance to ask the foster carer questions about the child, so much better than relying on just paperwork giving you facts.

Having a medical consultation via Teams with the Dr was highly beneficial, giving us the opportunity to ask questions about the child's health.

The approval/matching panel via Teams was strange but I felt it made us feel a lot more relaxed and we could enjoy it.

2. *My experience of the adoption process so far*

My husband and I has discussed adoption for a number of years but finally found ourselves in a position to proceed in early 2021. After looking at a couple of different agencies we chose to apply through Adopt Coast to Coast.

After completing the initial ROI we were invited to training. I loved the training, our trainer was lovely put everyone at ease. We were encouraged to keep in touch with the other prospective adopters on the course, which has been great and we still

Speak to quite a lot of them now. The training was delivered virtually, though this was definitely more convenient, I feel face to face experiences are always more beneficial.

We met with our social worker on a weekly basis, some through Teams, some face to face and discussed all the stuff you have to discuss. She made us feel so at ease, I feel we got on well and a number of the sessions were actually really enjoyable, which I did not expect after reading different stories online! I think the processes can become quite confusing but she kept us on the right track throughout and always explained honestly where we were up to and what was likely to happen next. We got through everything in time for panel in January.

After panel we joined Link Maker which I found pretty difficult, then in March our worker approached us with a little girls profile, we expressed an interest and here we are now waiting for matching panel in approx. 7 weeks!!!

Things are definitely moving more quickly now but I feel comfortable enough to ring our worker with even the stupidest questions or worries I have that crop up.

So now I have everything crossed and hope things will progress smoothly, but I am definitely letting myself get excited now.

Overall I have enjoyed the process, I have learnt things I never knew and definitely feel more prepared.

To me it really feels like a big jigsaw, and that everything happens for a reason. Yes of course there have been times I've been worried, stressed, or annoyed that things aren't moving as quickly as I would have liked; but it's not an easy or quick process and everything has got us to exactly where we are now, and soon my daughter will be home and it feels really right.

In conclusion, I'm grateful. I'm grateful to Adopt Coast to Coast for all the training, help and support for getting us to the point we are at now. And I'm grateful to our worker, for putting up with all my waffling and finding us a perfect match to complete our family 😊

Reflections of Panel Chair Barbara Brelsford.

The year from 2021 until 2022 has been a challenging one for the Adoption Service on a number of levels. Restrictions imposed as a result of the global pandemic meant that Adoption panels were held virtually and have only recently opened up to allow panel members, adoption service staff and prospective adopters to attend in person. This development has been welcomed by us all and it is beginning to feel as if some semblance of normality is at last being restored.

Despite not being able to carry out face to face assessments, adoption social workers adapted well to these new circumstances and there appears to have been no significant reduction in the number and regularity of panel meetings.

Quality of reports has not been compromised and it has been clear from their presentation and feedback that prospective adopters have felt supported and valued, despite predominantly not having actually met their assessing social worker other than on a screen.

Adoption service staff should be commended and thanked for their efforts along with agency medical advisers who provide such valuable advice and guidance to both panel members and prospective adopters. And without the technical expertise and patience of the panel administrator, virtual panels would not have operated as smoothly as they did. All these factors have come together to minimise any delay in placing the child with their adoptive family and that remains at the heart of all we do.

In October 2021, our respected friend and colleague, Mary Greenwood, made the decision after fifteen dedicated years as panel chair, to retire and our thanks and good wishes go with her. Mary's successor, Sandie Dixon, has ably taken up the reins as co-chair of the panel as we look forward to a further year of continuously improving practice.

A key feature in pursuing a commitment to adoption as a way of meeting a child's need for permanence, is the establishment of the Coast-to-Coast Regional Adoption Agency which has now been functioning since 1st April 2021 and includes an exciting learning partnership with colleagues from TFC and Cumbria.

And finally, sincere thanks to our panel members who are so conscientious and spend a significant proportion of their own time in both preparing for and contributing to the vital discussions which go towards securing a permanent future for our looked after children.

Reflections of panel chair Sandie Dixon.

I have chaired panels since September 2021 and was immediately taken by the commitment shown by panel members. By their very nature, panel members are busy people through their work commitments, dedication to the children looked after by them through foster care or their voluntary work but they are consistently well prepared for panel and use their knowledge and expertise to scrutinise each case presented to them.

Generally, the quality of reports presented to panel is good, sometimes being so thorough that panel has no questions for the social worker or applicants. When I first started there were some concerns regarding foster carers' reports having so little information, or that information being so superficial, that it was difficult to get a picture of the child(ren); this however has been rectified and the reports have greatly improved.

It has been an honour and a privilege to be part of an adopter's journey and I know that each member of the panel is acutely aware of the importance of their role and the part this plays in safeguarding some of the most vulnerable children."

The Child's Journey

- In this reporting period 73 children had an ADM decision for a plan of adoption, in the previous year this was 40.
- 59 Children have been granted a Placement Order compared to 37 in the previous year.
- In this period 65 children were matched at panel.
- 34 of these children being matched within the RAA, of which 27 matches were with DCC approved adopters, 7 matches were with our partner spokes.
- 31 matches were with voluntary adoption agencies.
- This is a significant increase from the previous year where 35 children were matched at Panel. Of these 15 were placed with external providers.

The budget position at the end of this reporting period is;

- DCC placed children with 26 approved adoptive households from our 2 partner spokes.
- Cumbria, 7 families costing £189,000.
- TFC, 1 family costing £27,000.
- 34 children were placed in voluntary adoption agency placements.

- 22 Adoption Orders have been granted within this period This has been negatively impacted by the Somerset judgement.
- 41 children are placed with prospective adopters but not yet adopted.
- 4 children's plan were changed from adoption to long-term fostering.

In this period a sibling group of 2 children experienced a disruption 3 months after being placed with their adopters in an external agency. The learning from an upcoming disruption meeting will be shared with the staff in Durham and across the RAA for adoption practice development.

Family Finding

Profiling events remained virtual due to covid restrictions. However, face to face activity days and profiling events are planned to take place throughout 2022.

Early permanence via Fostering for Adoption (FFA) is a priority and within this period 6 children have been placed in this arrangement. 1 of these children was placed under FFA regulations due to the Somerset Judgement.

Early permanence meetings are held shortly after a child becomes Looked After when adoption is being considered as a possible plan. The child's plan is then tracked by the Permanency Monitoring group, chaired by Jodie Henderson, and attended by Sara Peterson, Looked After team manager, Barbara Arbon Adoption team manager. Further regular weekly monitoring is undertaken by Sara Peterson, Barbara Arbon and Sarah Fitzpatrick, social work consultant in the Adoption Team.

Post Box contact

Post box contact has significantly improved through the commencement in post of the Adoption Support Worker and named business support worker who have worked to bring the post box up to date on the LCS data base. The next step for improvement in this area is to upload historical post box letters to LCS. This is a very large piece of work and is moving forward.

219 birth parents have been supported in writing their post box letter or understanding the post box process. This also included Indirect contact

agreements that have been put in place on historical post box cases. This work has been undertaken by the adoption support worker.

Post Adoption Support Services

Overall, there has been a significant increase in each area of adoption support services which are a statutory requirement for each Local Authority.

Adoption Support Fund assessments/application

Within this reporting period 115 children have been supported through successful assessments of need completed by Social Workers within the adoption team. This is a total funding agreed by the ASF of £373000.00

This area of work is increasing vastly both within DCC and nationally. This is having an impact on the ASF provider, who have needed to extend their decision-making timeframe from 20 days to 25 days following the receipt of an application. This causes further delay for families waiting for therapeutic service input.

There have been 13 children who have also received services from our colleagues within the Safeguarding teams at either Child in Need or Child Protection levels alongside the support received from the post adoption support services. The allocated adoption social workers have attended various meetings as part of the team around the family in all cases.

Feedback from adoptive parents requesting support and advice

- *From one adopter: xxxxx, that is the best news. Thank you so so much for all your involvement and getting this to fruition.*
- *From another adopter: You have been such a godsend to us*
- *Another adopter has verbally expressed her thanks "for the support she has had".*

Full Circle

Barbara Arbon, Team Manager meets weekly with Michelle Summerbell and the Full Circle team to consider Adoption Support requests in order to work collaboratively with this DCC therapeutic service. The aim is to provide wherever possible swifter more streamlined services for families in need of therapeutic support.

Parents are asked if they wish to have Full Circle work alongside the adoption social worker to complete their assessment of need. If in agreement this takes place and where a service may be provided by Full Circle and should parents

wish to select them as a provider, an ASF application is made to fund the work.

It should be noted that it is parental choice, and the adoption staff have a duty to provide a list of therapeutic providers to parents.

To further support new adoptive parents prior to Adoption Orders being granted where agreement is given an assessment of need is carried out by the DCC adoption social worker in order to see if the criteria has been met to make an ASF application for the adopters to enrol on a nurturing attachment rolling programme with Full Circle. This is intended to ensure ongoing support in the earlier stages of the adoption and build on parent's strengths and abilities, hoping to reduce the need for more intense support as the child grows.

The Adoption Service also provides:

Support, advice, and counselling to birth parents and those who are affected by adoption. This task is undertaken by the Adoption Support Worker. 23 birth parents have requested and received support regarding their children's adoption, by the adoption support worker in this period.

For the previous 12 years ARC Adoption Agency were contracted to undertake access to records for adopted adults wishing to access their adoption records. This contract ended at the start of this reporting period and the task was then undertaken instead by DCC adoption social workers 48 adopted persons have requested this service.

Non-Agency Adoption

This relates is where the Local Authority does not place the child for adoption, i.e. step-parent/parent's partner/grandparent seeking to adopt a named child.

The number of referrals and complexities of this area of adoption work are increasing. One part time adoption social worker specialises in this field of adoption and leads on and undertakes the non-agency work.

In this reporting period there have been:

- 72 enquiries, this is a significant increase on the same period last year being 42.

- 17 initial visits were completed, with 9 resulting in an assessment commencing.
- 6 Adoption Orders have been granted.
- 4 completed assessments are waiting to be finalised at court.
- 1 assessment was completed but the couple have not submitted their application to court yet.
- 1 assessment was completed but the family did not apply to court because they required support from colleagues in Children's Services.
- 9 assessments are ongoing although it is unlikely all will result in the families making an application to court.

Adoption Support Allowance

Financial support is payable under Part 3 of the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 to an adoptive parent for the purpose of supporting the placement of the adoptive child or the continuation of adoption arrangements after an adoption order is made. The Adoption Support Allowance is means tested and is reviewed annually. The review process requires Strategic Manager sign off. In this reporting period the agreed annual budget was £895,107.00. The amount of allowance paid to adopters was £781,031.34. This was an underspend of 114,075.66.

Signs of Safety/Signs of wellbeing/success

Adoption team staff have now attended Signs Of Safety training sessions delivered by DCC learning and development team and this model is now being embedded within day-to-day practice. As this model has been devised primarily as a safeguarding tool, it has been necessary to adapt some wording to ensure it is used to its best advantage within the adoption service. This affords us the opportunity to work with the model to make the best fit for service delivery.

LCS and Dashboard

In this reporting period adoption work has moved to use Liquid Logic recording systems for Children's Social care (LCS) in all areas of the service. The LCS team

have worked alongside Barbara Arbon and several adoption social workers to agree the processes, forms and recording methods needed. This has to some degree been via a process of testing with cases, highlighting issues and improvements needed and regular reviews with the LCS team.

There remains one area still to undergo some improvements and this is planned to take place in June 2022. This relates to the performance dashboard however; this is almost at completion point with the data team now having received a list of reporting areas required as authorised.

Key priority areas for 2022/23:

- 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 continue 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.
- To identify potential plans of adoption for children as early as possible. This will allow for targeted adopter recruitment at the earliest possible point. Where there is a need for an adopter able to take sibling groups, older children or children with more complex health or disability needs, thus preventing delay or the need to purchase adopters at a high cost from external providers.

Barbara Arbon

Adoption Team Manager



Adopt Coast to Coast Summary of progress - 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022

Marketing Activity

The marketing activity for 2021-2022 for Adopt Coast to Coast was all about brand recognition and getting the name out as far and wide as possible. Whilst events and some more traditional tools couldn't be employed due to the pandemic activity focused on the following actions:

- Public relations – stories about our launch, appeals, events, campaigns and more
- Internal communications – amongst three partners
- Radio campaign – activity during the launch and another campaign in October
- TV advert – to celebrate the launch of Adopt Coast to Coast
- Google advertising – making sure Adopt Coast to Coast appears highly when searched for
- Facebook and Instagram advertising – to raise awareness and promote events
- Display advertising on key websites to raise awareness of Adopt Coast to Coast
- Third party campaigns – joining in with activity such as for National Adoption Week or New Family Social's

LGBT+ Adoption and Fostering Week

- Organic social media activity
- Newsletters to adopters and those interested in adoption
- Spoke support from three partner local authorities including emails, internal publications, external publications, intranet
- Regular website updates

Adopt Coast to Coast and spokes' performance

	Adopt Coast to Coast	Cumbria	Durham	Together for Children
Enquiries (2021/22)	558	186 (*33%)	216 (*39%)	156 (*28%)
Approvals	78	11 (*14%)	40 (*51%)	27 (*35%)

Matches	122	28 (*23%)	65 (*53%)	29 (*24%)
Conversion from enquiry to approval	14%	6%	19%	17%

*percentage of RAA performance

Durham County Council's Adoption Performance

It is very positive to note that the transition to Adopt Coast to Coast has not had a detrimental impact on the children who have moved to adoptive families or recruitment of Adopt Coast to Coast prospective adopters assessed by Durham's adoption team.

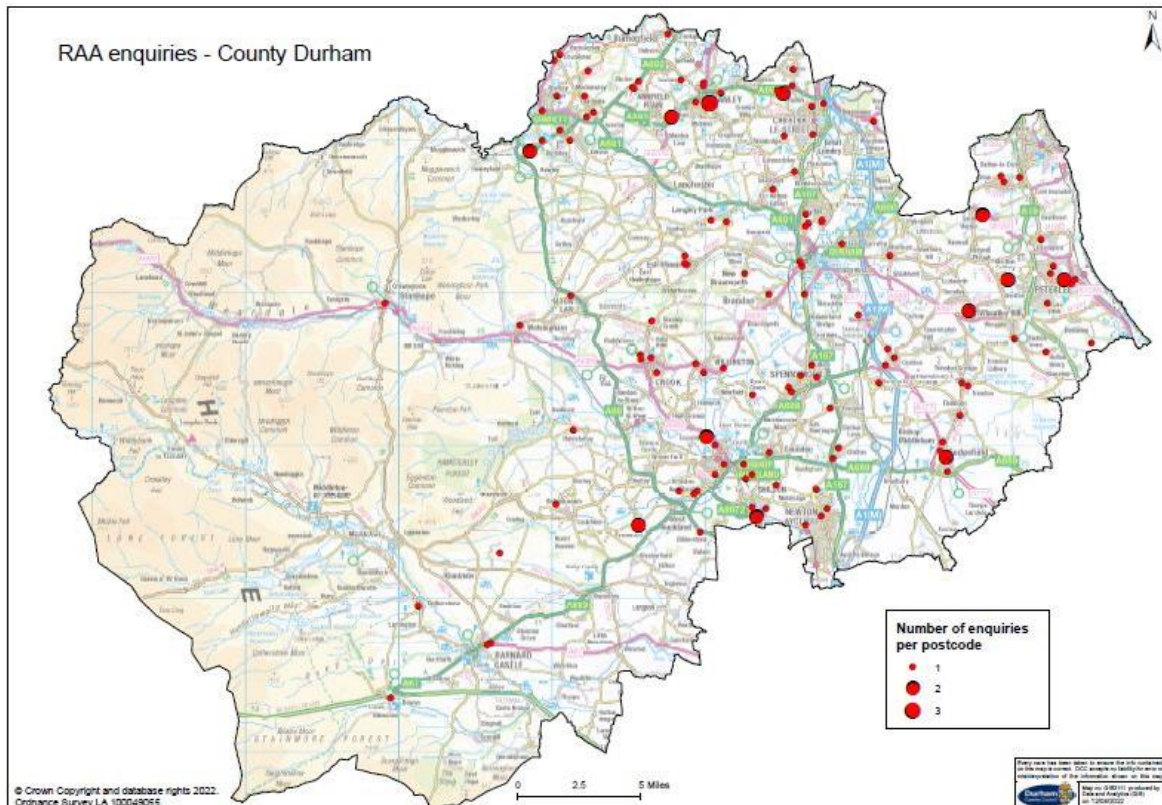
Children's Journey

	2020/21	2021/22	Analysis
Waiting with PO	14	10	<p>The slight upward trend of children waiting more than 6 months for a match with their adoptive family reflects the national position. Children with additional needs and groups of brothers and sisters are waiting longer. The national campaigns continue to seek to address these challenges.</p> <p>In respect of interagency usage, the responsible Strategic Manager continues to monitor spend and is reassured that interagency spend is only requested after RAA resources have been explored and it is in the child's best interests for an external match to be progressed.</p>
Waited over 6 months	1	4	
Matched	60	65	
Interagency use	18 (30%)	34 (52%)	

Prospective Adopter's Journey

Durham's adoption team are responding to enquiries promptly. The team cover Durham and all local authority areas south of Durham. The attached maps show the enquiries and stage 1 applications received from within Durham County.

Enquiries received



	2020/21	2021/22	Analysis
Enquiries	100	217	<p>The increased number of enquiries being converted to applications (stage 1) and approvals has enabled Durham to retain the high number of matches achieved in 2020/21.</p> <p>There are already 25 prospective adoptive families in stage 1 and 2 and with a further 11 in stage 2 pending. Therefore Durham would expect to approve these 36 families in 2021/22, without the new enquiries received since the 1st April 2022. We</p>
Stage 1	13* (0 in stage 2 pending)	17* (further 11 in stage 2 pending)	
Stage 2	9*	*8	
Approvals	41	40	
Number of matches for Durham approved adopters			

			therefore anticipate the 2 nd year of Adopt Coast to Coast will build on the excellent performance that the Durham adoption team have achieved in 2021/22.
--	--	--	---

*at 31st March

Prospective adopter journey

Katie and James were one of 6 couples to have started their journey with Adopt Coast to Coast and had a child placed before our 1st anniversary.

Katie and James have been a couple since they were teenagers and having married and enjoyed lots of quality time together as a couple, they felt the time was right to start their adoption application in April 2021.

Katie said: “I’ve known since the age of 15 that I wouldn’t be able to conceive naturally so adoption was always on the cards for us. We live in the same local authority as I work as a teacher and because I teach a few looked after children I know a lot of the social workers. I didn’t want to apply with the local authority where we live because I thought it felt too close to home, but I heard about Adopt Coast to Coast and knew they would cover our area.”

“The first part of the process felt long and we were checking our emails all of the time as there’s so many little steps to do that are out of your control. We really enjoyed the training and felt like something was really happening which we were more involved in. The second stage was around 6 weeks and was timed to fit in with the school holidays for me which really helped us.

“Our social worker was brilliant, when you’re first assigned a social worker, you’re worried about whether you’ll get on and how it’ll feel talking to them about such personal things, but our social worker was so down to earth and easy to talk to. What was clear from the start was that you don’t have to be a certain way to adopt, you don’t need lots of money just time and love. I think more people should do it and more young people too – I’m 27 now and I was one of the youngest on our training and although it’s hard and emotionally draining at times it’s worth it.”

Meeting our son for the first time was magical. He sat on my knee immediately and he was so relaxed and I felt an instant connection– it was definitely meant to be.

14th April 2021 – enquired with Adopt Coast to Coast

12th May 2021 – commenced stage 1 and completed 3-day preparation sessions

15th July 2021 – moved into stage 2

5th October 2021 – approved as suitable to adopt

Following approval they were considered for children within their matching considerations and waited patiently as their preference was for a baby under 1 year of age who was not presenting with any additional needs.

9th February 2022 – match agreed with a 9 month old baby boy.

Speaking just four weeks after their little boy moved in with them Katie said: “We’d had so many years to prepare for adoption and we always knew it would be our route to parenthood so we accepted it and knowing him has been the best four weeks of our lives – he’s just amazing. I was worried before we started all of this that we wouldn’t have a connection but he’s our whole world - he 100% feels like our son already.

Marketing activity priorities for 2022/23

- Marketing activity will include a focus on potential enquirers for groups of brothers and sisters, children with additional health needs and/or developmental uncertainty.
- Alongside the Adopt Coast to Coast activity, there is a pan regional initiative to increase opportunities for children to be adopted by families living in the North East and Cumbria through strategic partnership working across the 3 RAAs and 4 VAAs in our region.
- Continue to review and develop marketing activity and the recruitment practice across the spokes being cognizant of the lived experience of children and their adoptive families and the findings from the national mystery shopper activity.

Paula Gibbons

Head of Service

Adopt Coast to Coast