

**County Durham
Corporate Parenting Panel
Adoption Team
Annual report
April 1st 2022 – March 31st 2023**



A picture says a thousand words.

A beautiful picture from a newly adopted child to the family's Adoption Social Worker.

Durham County Council Adoption Service

This annual report covers all adoption activity within Durham County Council (DCC), a 'spoke' within the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt Coast to Coast. This is a partnership 'hub and spoke' model between Durham and Together for Children (TFC). In this reporting year Cumbria County Council (CCC) were also partners in the spoke, however from 1st April 2023 CCC are no longer partners due to changes within their corporate structure.

The Statement of Purpose for Durham Adoption Service was updated at the time of writing this report and once agreed by Senior Management, a copy will be provided to OFSTED as per the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003. The Statement of Purpose will be reviewed and updated again by October 2023.

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 2022 covering April to September 2022. This report takes into account the full financial year, 1st April 2022 to March 31st, 2023.

Durham Adoption Team Staffing

- The Head of Children's Services is Rachel Farnham.
- The Head of Adopt Coast to Coast is Paula Gibbons.
- The Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence is Sharon Davey.
- The adoption Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is Jodie Henderson. Other Senior Managers have covered this role with prior knowledge in Jodie Henderson's absence in this year.
- Rachel Riley is the Service Manager, Children and Young Person's Service. The service manager role is new to this area of Children's Services. Rachel came into post in July 2022.
- 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, Sarah Fitzpatrick and Wendy Ellis
- 7x full time social workers, Ian Jones, Ashleigh Sutherland, Amanda Stearman, Julie Blakey, Kiera Tame, Clare Bewley and Rachel Prudhoe.

- 4x part time social workers, Denise Harding, Kayleigh Thompson, Lynn Patterson, Dawn Linton.
- 1x 4 day week social worker, Karen Wingfield
- 1x Adoption support worker, Rachelle Thompson
- Due to staff sickness and volume of workload there have been 3 full time agency social workers employed to support the team
 - 1 x short term contract leaving after 2.5 months.
 - 1 x left the agency post having secured a permanent position within the team.
 - 1 x remains in post with the team, having joined in May 2022. Should a permanent position become available this worker wishes to apply. This worker has been a valuable asset to the team in her time with us.
- 3 x student Social Workers have been provided with placements within the team over this period.
- The Adoption Team has recruited 3 Social Workers within this period.
 - 2 x Full time Social Worker posts - filled by experienced Social Workers, one who prior to being offered the post had been an agency worker within the team, the second a DCC member of staff in the Fostering Team. The workers commenced their posts in February 2023.
 - 1 x part time Social Worker post (26-hour week) filled by experienced member of staff external to DCC. This worker joined the team in November 2022.
- 2 Adoption Panel Chairs are independently employed. Barbara Brelsford and Sandie Dixon. Jane Lowther is the Vice Chair. Within this year Jane has not needed to cover any panels as Vice Chair.
- Duty is covered on a rota basis by the Social Workers within the team. There is a main duty worker along with a backup duty worker Monday to Friday 8.30am – 5pm, 4.30pm on Fridays. There is also 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 267 initial enquires, (267 applicants equating to 229 households) of which 111 applicants (80 households) progressed to have an initial visit.

This is an increase from the previous year of 217 initial enquiries which resulted in 62 initial visits. Some initial enquiries do not progress to an initial visit. This has been for several reasons, such as the enquirer is under 21 years old, they may not be ready to progress and are just seeking some information at this point, they wish to adopt a baby but are smokers. It not uncommon for people to make an online enquiry but then to not respond to calls or emails from duty staff. In these situations, the RAA has an agreed timeframe of 1 month to keep the enquiry open with regular attempts to make contact with the person/persons before closing the enquiry down. An email, voicemail, text or letter are always sent advising of this closing down but inviting them to return at anytime in the future.

- 12 Information sessions have been held via Teams and facilitated equally by DCC and TFC social workers, each undertaking 6 sessions. There has been a flexible approach to the timing of the events, including evenings and Saturdays. Information events are not mandatory to attend for applicants. The aim of them is to provide further basic information to assist the applicant in deciding if adoption may be what they wish to do. These events are usually attended pre Stage 1.

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 were able to attend Cumbrian courses and vice versa. 2 courses due to be facilitated by DCC were cancelled in December 2022 and February 2023 due to low numbers. Group work and participation makes for better training and learning, therefore those booked onto these groups attended an alternate one.

In this period Durham adoption staff have facilitated the training for 58 applicants.

April 2022	25 attendees
June 2022	8 attendees
Aug 2022	13 attendees
Oct 2022	12 attendees
Dec 2022	Course cancelled

Feb 2023

Course cancelled

A delay has been caused within Stage 1 for some applicants between 13th January 2023 and 16th February 2023 in respect of medical assessments for prospective adopters. A concern was raised to DCC Fostering management regarding the sharing of medical information from the GP to DCC admin staff, who then sent the information on to the medical advisers for summaries. The concern related to this being a potential GDPR breach. The Adoption team followed the same procedures and was advised until confirmation was given on what process needed to be followed, no medical documentation was to be sent out. This took a number of weeks for Senior Management and Legal Advisers to conclude, therefore causing delays for adopters. It was eventually agreed the process did not breach GDPR and could then be reinstated.

Stage 2

In this reporting period, 41 adoptive households were approved. At the end of this reporting period, there were 11 prospective adopter households in Stage 1, 2 in stage 2 pending (applicants can choose to have up to 6 months break between stages 1 and 2) and 6 prospective adopters in Stage 2.

During Stage 2, prospective adopters were invited to attend an optional half day training session providing information about Fostering for Adoption (FFA). Should a prospective adopter be clear they do not wish to become parents via this route they can opt to not attend. Early Permanence continues to be a key priority, as it allows children to experience a reduced number of care givers and moves allowing for stronger attachments to be formed much sooner.

The sessions held this year have provided detailed exploration of the FFA process. These sessions provided clear, well-balanced advice and information on the benefits of FFA for both child and adopter. This training has been well received, and prospective adopters are fully aware that attendance at the session does not mean they must undertake FFA. Prospective adopters have felt able to progress with FFA but have not restricted themselves solely to this pathway to being matched with a child, some have chosen to take a child who already has a Placement Order granted.

Within this year work to improve Early Permanence (EP) for children has been undertaken and the EP training programme for prospective adopters is to be extended to 2 full days, as agreed by agencies across the country. It was expected that this would have commenced already, however as yet this has not happened. It is anticipated this will start in the very near future. Adopters will only be considered for Early Permanence if this training has been attended.

The 1-day therapeutic parenting training, which is mandatory has been delivered during Stage 2. This is delivered on a shared basis with TFC staff. 2 experienced

Social Workers within DCC's Adoption Team deliver this training bi-monthly. This training allows for the attendees to understanding the challenges of re-parenting children who have experienced loss and trauma and how therapeutic parenting can help the child with their emotional healing.

Here's what some of our adopters have to say

We found the adoption process so easy.

Great introduction meeting and training. Great initial call from yourself around process and next steps as well as ongoing meetings to get the information needed together for panel.

Teams was great and convenient for many of the session as it gives potential adopters the flexibility to get on with their life in the meantime and reduces time off work.

I hope the service continues to use Teams where is can and learns from some of the learnings/ benefits of Covid.

You were a great help and provided guidance along each step.

I have told lots of friends who are considering adoption that the County Durham team are excellent, and it is nowhere near as scary as you believe. Even panel was fine.

We took the opportunity to get to know the foster parents well which helped massively with introduction and transition to new home.

Everyone we encountered was amazing even the team who help with passports etc. Couldn't have been more accommodating.

You do a great job, and the process is almost perfect!

Thanks again for everything!

We contacted Coast to Coast after being approved as prospective adopters with Barnardos' for coming up to 2 years and we had not being matched with a child.

We contacted Coast to Coast and found out how much of the process we would need to do before going to Panel for approval. We were passed onto our Social Worker who helped and supported us throughout the whole process.

We were quickly matched with our little girl. Social Workers have offered us all so much help and support throughout this whole process and we can't thank them enough for everything they have done for us in helping us become a family.

Firstly we found the whole adoption experience a smooth and enjoyable experience. The one thing that we found the most helpful and beneficial was having you as our social worker right from the beginning. This meant that we developed a positive relationship with yourself in which both myself and (my partner) opened up a lot more and actually made it very easy to talk to you. You were supportive, approachable, and never judged us and we were able to ask questions or voice any concerns we had and did not feel as though we were being a nuisance. Your relationship with our daughter was also great and made this process a smooth one and also one where she felt equally as involved in the process and that her role was just as important. This has supported her in the process as she also felt comfortable talking to you which has led to her having a positive experience in which had led to her developing a close relationship with her little sister. We do feel that this was the most important part of the process that we had this relationship with yourself.

The guidance, training and support we received throughout was really useful, especially the initial training at the beginning of the process. It made us think of aspects of adoption that we hadn't considered and helped us to prepare for what we may experience throughout the process.

We felt the whole process was well planned and we could see where we were going on our journey and also the reason behind it and there was clear structure.

The hardest part of the process we felt was the matching after we had been to panel as this we felt was more like an emotional roller coaster as it took 4 months until we were matched with (our child). This was hard for both us and our daughter who found it hard but again your support here was appreciated and especially when you said things happen for a reason. You were very right there and we were just waiting to be matched with our gorgeous little munchkin who is right for us and who we are right for her. Once the match was made again the process was smooth and the support was great from both yourself and our daughter's social worker in helping prepare for panel and then introductions. We felt really prepared for (our child) coming to live with us and that was a result of all the meetings we had had with Foster Carer, Full Circle and the Medical Advisor.

We honestly couldn't be happier now and are now completed as our little family. This is down to yourself and the agency and we honestly couldn't have asked for it to have gone any smoother or to have received any more support.

Thank you again and we will miss you coming for our meetings which were more like catch ups. We will always be grateful for your support and help.

Adoption Panel/Independent Reviewing Mechanism

Adoption Panel has been held 27 times over this 12-month period. Panel is held fortnightly, and additional panels held when necessary to prevent delays for children. 3 of the 27 panels held were additional panels.

What was presented to panel in this period.

- 58 matches for children with adopters. All matches were recommended and latterly ratified by ADM.
- 42 adopter approvals were considered. 41 adoptive families were recommended and latterly ratified by ADM.
Within this cohort only 1 adoption application for approval in March 2023 was not recommended by Panel. It was necessary to present a short report to panel expressing concerns. The applicants chose not to withdraw themselves during the assessment stage, but advised they wanted Panel to say they felt they were not suitable to become adopters. This recommendation has been supported by ADM.

No applicants have been presented to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM) within this year.

The quality of reports being presented to panel continue to be of a very high standard. Panel members and Chairs have regularly provided positive feedback to Social Workers, their Managers and Senior Managers. On some occasions, reports have been so thorough panel members have not been able to identify any questions to ask of the applicants or Social Workers within panel.

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

Panel Members had their annual appraisals in spring 2022, undertaken by Barbara Arbon jointly with either Sandie Dixon or Barbara Brelsford.

There has been a continued drive to recruit new panel members. This continues to be a priority to ensure the Central List has a range of panel members available to ensure quoracy. Currently we have no elected members sitting as panel members. It is hoped that applications will be received for these positions.

In the last year we have successfully recruited 8 new panel members. 5 panel members have resigned due to personal circumstances.

Here's some feedback from a couple who have attended the DCC adoption panel.

A very positive experience overall. It felt like a friendly discussion, and we felt like we were listened to. All panel members were very knowledgeable of our case⁴ and had good, relevant questions and comments.

Reflections of Panel Chairs Barbara Brelsford and Sandie Dixon

During this reporting period, Durham County Council Adoption Service has continued to operate a more flexible hybrid panel whereby members are able to choose their preferred or more convenient method of attendance. The majority of panel members now attend in person and some online, for example, prospective adopters living a distance away from the office base . It is common practice for our two medical advisers to appear online given their pressured clinic responsibilities and appointments.

We are committed to creating an environment which is welcoming and enabling and that approach applies equally to social work staff as well as prospective adopters and staff from other adoption agencies.

Along with the Agency Adviser, it is customary for the Panel Chair to meet with the prospective adopters prior to coming into the panel room , in order to outline the composition and arrangement of the panel . That approach seems to be generally well received and appreciated in what otherwise has the potential to be a daunting experience.

It is also common practice for the Panel Chairs to inform the Agency Adviser if we have any concerns about gaps in information in the paperwork prior to the Panel meeting wherever possible. There is a commitment to avoiding the need to defer making a recommendation on the basis of needing further specific information which creates unnecessary anxiety for the applicant. Close liaison is maintained between the Panel Chairs and the management within the agency, who are always responsive to any requests for additional information or clarity.

Panel members are aware that they have the potential to make an influential contribution to good practice and are supported to grow in confidence about the important role that they can play. They read the panel papers in advance and come fully prepared to contribute to the meeting. Much of the content seems to be becoming increasingly more complex and distressing in its content.

During the reporting period, Durham Adoption Panel has been fortunate in retaining a core of well-established and knowledgeable panel members as well as recruiting new members who are proving to be an asset as they become increasingly more experienced. That is not to say, however, that there are still occasions when the Panel may only just be quorate, with a particular struggle to identify a social work member! Continuing efforts are being made to recruit a local authority elected member as a representative of the corporate parent.

Overall, the panels are used to working together as a group and function best when members know each other.

The quality of social work reports and assessments continue to be of a high standard, and it is clear from the feedback, that prospective adopters feel well supported and valued.

It is gratifying that Early Permanence continues to be a key priority for the Adoption Service. Regrettably, some of our looked after children where adoption is believed to be a potential outcome, spend protracted periods of time with their foster carers until a court has reached a decision about their final care plan. As already stated within the report, Early Permanence offers stability at a very early stage, preventing multiple moves and the associated trauma of separation and loss of attachment figures.

We welcome the introduction in February 2023 of National Early Permanence Standards in what continues to be an area of challenge and look forward to panel members having access to training.

Panel Chairs have noted the Adoption Team's progress in gearing the delivery of its work in relation to ensuring inclusivity, throughout the advice and enrolment process for potential adopters. The team's flexibility in delivering assessment and training has allowed work to be done with people in different circumstances. The results can be seen in the diversity of potential adopters coming to panel in relation to gender and sexuality, though applicants are more likely to be white than from an ethnic minority. The lack of diversity in the make up of panel is, however, an ongoing issue with panel members being mainly White British and predominantly female. Panel Chairs believe that the only way to balance recruitment would be through a targeted approach with a recruitment campaign aimed at reaching a more diverse audience.

As Panel Chairs, we have raised the issue of contact, particularly, but not exclusively, between brothers and sisters. We expressed concerns regarding:

The language in CPR's sometimes being generic, rather than looking at each child as an individual.

A lack of analysis or rationale as to why the level of contact described has been decided upon, Indirect contact being almost always restricted to once per year , with the sharing of photographs being forbidden.

Indirect contact always being in the form of a letter with no thought for the use of any other media [for example, audible tapes and showing little creativity in ways to make indirect contact meaningful and special.

Direct contact between an adopted child and their brothers and sisters who remain in foster care rarely, if ever, being considered, regardless of whether the child who is looked after has or has not maintained regular contact with birth parents. This level of contact [or lack of] is rarely reported as being subject to regular review with an option of change, if in the children's best interest in the future.

As Panel Chairs, we are pleased and reassured to have seen that there has been some progress with an improvement in the Contact section of reports and in the willingness of social workers to be more flexible, but this is work that is ongoing. There is a commitment from the Adoption Team Manager, to ensuring progress in this area.

It is our belief that adopters are often more than willing to promote contact at a level and in such a way, as to be in their child's best interest. It has been heart warming to see instances where prospective adopters of children who are being placed separately from their brother or sister, have come to panel with plans on how they wish to promote relationships not only with their child's brother or sister but also with the child's adopters, seeing them as "extended family " .

It is also pleasing to see that good practice where children are able to maintain contact with foster carers who have been significant people in their lives, is embedded in the thinking around contact.

And finally, sincere thanks to our panel members who are so conscientious and spend a significant amount of their own time in preparing and contributing towards securing a permanent future for our looked after children. Good administrative arrangements also continue to be provided and are key to the effective functioning of the panel .

Adoption service staff should also be commended for their much appreciated efforts along with medical advisers who provide such detailed and informative medical summaries.

The Child's Journey

- In this reporting period, 60 children had an ADM decision for a plan of adoption, in the previous year this was 73.
- 54 Children have been granted a Placement Order, compared to 59 in the previous year.
- In this period, 65 children were matched at Panel. This is the same number as in the previous year.
- 46 of these children being matched within the RAA; of which 39 matches were with DCC approved adopters, 7 matches were with prospective adopters from our partner spokes.
- 19 matches were with other Local Authorities, RAA's or Voluntary Adoption Agencies.
- This is a significant decrease from the previous year, where 31 children were placed with external providers.
- 43 Adoption Orders have been granted for DCC children within this period.
- 28 children are placed with prospective adopters but not yet adopted.
- 41 children's plans were changed from adoption to long-term fostering.

No disruptions have happened within this period.

There has been one extraordinary Court case relating to an Adoption Order application within this period. This related to birth parents being given leave to oppose the granting of the Adoption Order. This caused significant delay for the child and distress for the prospective adopters. The Adoption Order was granted following various assessments by independent professionals being undertaken.

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

- DCC placed children with 7 approved adoptive households from our 2 partner spokes. 1 child with Cumbria. 6 children with TFC.
- Cumbria – A recharge to Cumbria of £54000 was made for adopters sold to CCC by DCC. No charge incurred by DCC from CCC.
- TFC – annual recharge costing payable to TFC by DCC = £108000.
- 17 children were placed externally to Coast to Coast with inter-agency fees costing £515,185. This was 7 sibling groups of 2 children and 5 individual children, all of which were older children or young children with complex health needs.
- The total allocated adoption placement budget was £1,265,705. There was an underspend of £655,645. To add to this was a sale of DCC adopters to Cumbria County Council to the value of £70,000.00, thus creating an underspend of £601,060.00

Family Finding

Profiling events/Activity days have been held facilitated or attended by DCC staff.

Activity days are held to family find for children with additional needs, sibling groups or older children. The days allow prospective adopters to interact with the children through fun and enjoyable activities, such as arts and crafts, sports, and games, to establish whether they feel an emotional connection. It

aims to broaden prospective adopters thinking in regards to ages and needs of children and if they feel able to consider children they otherwise would not consider.

The purpose of an exchange day is the same as that for an activity day, however no children attend this event. Adoption family finders and if possible, children's Social Workers and Foster Carers attend. Each adoption agency has a stand where profiles and photographs of children are displayed. Prospective adopters from around the country are invited to attend and they have the opportunity to talk directly with Social Workers and carers about the children. As with activity days, the aim is to broaden prospective adopters' thinking about the child or children they are open to considering as a match for themselves.

Senior Management consent to family find externally to the RAA is sought when no in-house adopters can meet the needs of some DCC children. Such children are those with additional health and/or disability needs, older children and sibling groups. This consent is needed before a child can be either taken to an activity day or their profile shared at an exchange day.

DCC hosted 1 activity day in July 2023, 14 children were taken across the 3 RAA spokes. 3 of these were DCC children. This was a sibling group. No match was identified and latterly the plan for the children needed to be 1 child being separated from their 2 siblings. Matches were identified and progressed with direct sibling contact agreed between adopters.

DCC have hosted 2 exchange days this year in May 2022 and July 2022.

An activity day was held by an external agency in Leeds in March 2023. A DCC sibling group of 2 attended this day, supported by their carer and Social Worker. No update is available as yet as to whether prospective adopters were identified from this event for them.

Cumbria County Council hosted an exchange day in September 2022. Barbara Arbon, Team Manager attended along with a child's Social Worker and Foster Carer, where profiles were presented for twins and another sibling group.

Further activity days and exchange days are to be held in the upcoming year.

Early Permanence (EP) via Fostering for Adoption (FFA) is a priority and within this period 3 children have been placed in this arrangement.

Early Permanence meetings are held as soon as possible once adoption via EP is being considered as a possible plan. The child's plan is then tracked by

the Permanency Monitoring Group, chaired by Jodie Henderson or Rachel Riley, and attended by Sara Peterson, Looked After Team Manager and Barbara Arbon Adoption Team Manager. Further regular weekly monitoring is undertaken by Barbara Arbon, Sarah Fitzpatrick Social Work Consultant and the family finding Social Workers 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 tirelessly to bring the Post Box up to date on the LCS data base. A very large task that remains ongoing is the uploading of old Post Box contact to the electronic database. There have been admin issues over the year which has slowed this process down, however approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ is now uploaded. Work continues to complete the final uploads.

87 birth parents have been supported in writing their Post Box letter or understanding the 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.

Support is also provided by the Adoption Support Worker to birth mothers who are engaging with the PAUSE project. Pause works with women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeated pregnancies that result in children needing to be removed from their care. These birth mothers are assisted with their Post Box contact in respect of writing and sending their letters. Also, where needed, contacting other Local Authorities on their behalf to try ensure they receive their letters in return.

Support was also given to a terminally ill birth mother to ensure contact was undertaken early before she sadly passed away.

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, 94 children have been supported through successful 'assessments of need' completed by Social Workers within the Adoption team. Overall, 116 claims were made to the Adoption Support Fund on behalf of children in need of therapeutic support relating to adoption issues.

Total Amount for Approved claims by the ASF 2022/23 = £515,153.60

Returned or surrendered funds 2022/23 = £118,884.28 Funds are returned when work ends early. On services and sessions provided are charged for.

Balance = £396,269.32 (of this £88,194.90 Full Circle was the provider)

This area of work is increasing vastly both within DCC and nationally. This is having an impact on the team in respect of duty work and caseloads.

There have also been some 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

- *You have honestly been so kind and helpful and always there if we needed you.*
- *Many thanks for your efficiency with this!*
- *Thank you so much for everything these last few months. Can't wait for the next steps in this next chapter x. Take care, you're amazing x –*
- *Hi, Thank you so much for the attached info for school this is exactly what we needed.*

Full Circle

The DCC Adoption Team and the Full Circle team work collaboratively in supporting families in need of post adoption therapeutic support.

All post adoption service referrals are received by adoption duty. They are screened once information has been provided by the parent making the referral. The duty worker, with management oversight where needed, consider the information and whether their needs may be met by the Full Circle team.

If deemed appropriate, parents are asked if they wish to have a referral made to Full Circle for them to complete the assessment of need. If parents are in agreement, the duty worker then refers the family into Full Circle. An ASF application is made to fund the work following the assessment of need.

This new process provides swifter more streamlined services for families in crisis who are in need of therapeutic support.

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 and not to direct them only to Full Circle.

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 Adoption Support Fund application for the adopters to enrol onto Nurturing Attachment (a 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 / grandparents have requested and received support regarding their children's/grandchildren's adoption, by the Adoption Support Worker in this period.

Access to records for adopted adults wishing to access their adoption records. Is undertaken by Adoption Social Workers. 32 adopted adults have requested this service.

Non-Agency Adoption

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:

- 21 initial visits were completed, with 13 resulting in an assessment commencing.
- 5 Adoption Orders have been granted.
- 6 completed assessments are waiting to be finalised at court.
- All assessments completed have progressed to applications being made to court.
- 11 assessments are ongoing although not 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 £798,542.00. The amount of allowance paid to adopters was £747,134.17. This was an underspend of £51,407.83

Signs of Safety/Signs of wellbeing/success

Adoption team staff continue to attend Signs Of Safety training sessions delivered by DCC Learning and Development 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

LCS (Liquidlogic) has now been firmly embraced within adoption. Changes have been made when issues have been identified throughout this year and the final remaining area still to be fully updated is Post Adoption support, including access to adoption records.

Barbara Arbon has met with the LCS team to look at developing this and it is expected that this final area will be fully embedded in the very near future.

In recent weeks the adoption dashboard has gone live. Having the dashboard will help with data collection immensely as the process has been manual using spreadsheets to date. This has historically been both cumbersome and time consuming.

Key priority areas for 2023/24:

- 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.
- Early Permanence families are to be identified at the earliest possible stage in children's planning to prevent delay and ensure minimal moves for children.

- To continue to recruit new Panel members to the Central List. This will ensure quoracy and prevent the possible situation of having 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

April 2023