

Corporate Parenting Panel

26 January 2024

Bi-annual Adoption Service Report

1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023



Report of Rachel Farnham, Head of Children's Social Care, Children and Young People's Services, Durham County Council

Electoral division(s) affected:

None.

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide a six monthly review of the Adoption Service including the updated key priority areas for 2023/24.

Executive summary

- 2 In this period, the adoption team have received 43 initial enquires. This converted to 19 initial visits being completed in this timeframe with a further three to be completed in October. A conversion of 49%
- 3 In this reporting period, nine adoptive families were approved. At the end of this reporting period, nine prospective adopter households were in stage 1, four in stage 2 pending (applicants can choose to have up to 6 months break between stages 1 and 2) and four prospective adopters in stage 2.
- 4 Matches for children with adopters continues to be carried out in a timely manner, with a clear drive to promote early permanence for children. 32 children had an agency decision maker (ADM) decision for a plan of adoption, 27 children have been granted a Placement Order and 25 Adoption Orders have been granted for children within this period.
- 5 The 11 panels have considered and recommended:
 - (a) Approval of six prospective adopters.
 - (b) The plan of adoption for a relinquished baby.
 - (c) 20 children matched with approved adopters.

- 6 The quality of reports presented to panel continues to be of a high standard and this has been validated by panel members and panel chairs. A priority remains the recruitment of new panel members to increase the central list. In this reporting period two potential new panel members have been interviewed and the statutory checks are underway. However, three panel members resigned in the same period due to personal circumstances. Despite best efforts the agency has not yet been able to recruit elected members.
- 7 No applications have been presented to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM) within this period.
- 8 77 birth parents have been supported in writing their Post Box letter or understanding the process. A total of 277 letters were received in this period.
- 9 In this period, there were 119 active post adoption support cases in the adoption team and 64 successful applications were made to the Adoption Support Fund.
- 10 In respect of non-agency adoption, the number of referrals and complexities of this area of adoption work are increasing.
- 11 In this reporting period there have been:
 - (a) Five initial visits completed, with three resulting in an assessment commencing.
 - (b) Six Adoption Orders have been granted. It is noticeable that court proceedings are taking longer, often with several hearings before the Order is granted.
 - (c) Three completed assessments are waiting to be finalised at court.
 - (d) Two assessments are completed, with applications about to be submitted to court.
 - (e) Nine assessments are ongoing although not all will result in the families making an application to court.

Recommendations

- 12 Corporate Parenting Panel is requested to:
 - (a) Note the contents
 - (b) Support the Adoption Service in recruiting Elected Members to the Central List

Background

- 12 This bi- annual report sets out the performance and the direction of travel for the Adoption Service as a spoke in the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt Coast to Coast.
- 13 Updated key priority areas for 2023/24:
 - (a) To continue to work collaboratively with our partner in Adopt Coast to Coast to recruit, assess and approve adopters in a timely manner.
 - (b) To ensure children’s plans of permanence via adoption are progressed without delay.
 - (c) Early Permanence carers are to be identified at the earliest possible stage in children’s planning to prevent delay and ensure minimal moves for children.
 - (d) To continue to recruit new Panel members to the Central List, particularly Elected Members.

Conclusion

- 14 Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel will receive a timely update, ensuring they are sighted on developments within the adoption service, including oversight of the updated key priority areas for 2023/24.

Other useful documents

- Detailed Bi-annual adoption team report relating to this reporting period. 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023. (See Appendix 2)

Authors

Barbara Arbon

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The work of the adoption service is governed by a legal framework.

Finance

This report as an overview of the practice has no financial implications.

Consultation

The service regularly seeks and considers the feedback from various persons involved in adoption to enhance practice.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

The adoption service embraces equality and diversity throughout all of the areas of work carried out.

Climate Change

This report as an overview of the practice has no climate change implications.

Human Rights

Human rights are considered in all areas of adoption.

Crime and Disorder

This report as an overview of the practice has no crime and disorder implications.

Staffing

This report as an overview of the practice has no staffing implications.

Accommodation

This report as an overview of the practice has no accommodation implications.

Risk

This report as an overview of the practice has no risk implications.

Procurement

This report as an overview of the practice has no procurement implications.

**County Durham
Corporate Parenting Panel
Adoption Team
Bi-Annual report**

April 1st 2023 – September 30th 2023

Author: Barbara Arbon

Adoption Team Manager

17/11/2023

Durham County Council Adoption Service

This bi-annual report covers all adoption activity within Durham County Council (DCC), between the 1st April 2023 and the 30th September 2023. The DCC Adoption Team continue to be 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).

The Statement of Purpose for Durham Adoption Service was updated in October 2023, reviewed by DCC's legal service and agreed by Senior Management. A copy has been provided to OFSTED as per the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003. The Statement of Purpose will be reviewed and updated again by April 2024.

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. An annual report was submitted in June 2022 covering the period April 1st 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 for Looked After and Permanence is Sharon Davey.
- DCC have a number of senior staff who act as Agency Decision Makers (ADM) for approval of prospective adopters, approval of children's permanency plans and adoption matches for children.
- The Adoption Team Manager is matrix managed by the Service Manager for the Children and Young Person's Service and the RAA Head of Service.
- Barbara Arbon is the Adoption Team Manager and Adoption Agency Advisor. There are 2 Consultant Social Workers who also undertake the Agency Panel Adviser role. At the end of this reporting period one of the Consultant Social Worker posts was vacant.
- 2 x Consultant Social Workers
- 6 x full time social workers.

- 4x part time social workers.
- 2x 4 day week social workers.
- 1x Adoption support worker.
- The staffing complement has been increased by a full-time agency social worker who has been working with the Adoption Team since May 2022.
- The Adoption Team continue to offer placements for student social workers and 1 completed their placement during the period of this report.

Recruitment

- In this period, DCC have received 43 initial enquires. This converted to 19 initial visits being completed in this timeframe with a further 3 to be completed in October. A conversion of 49%.

There are varying reasons why some enquiries do not progress and it is not uncommon for enquirers to make contact with us as part of information gathering in their very early stages of considering adoption.

This is a significant decrease from the same period in the previous year where we received 116 initial enquiries, of which 17 did not proceed to a home visit.

It should be noted that during March and June 2023 the RAA Communications and Marketing Officer post was vacant leading to a cessation of advertising. The newly appointed person came in to post and by the end of this reporting period, brand awareness was improving and there was an increase in enquiries, however not to the number in the previous period in 2022. This experience is reflected across the North East region and nationally and the financial crisis is thought to be a factor.

- 12 Information sessions have been held via Teams and facilitated equally by DCC and TfC social workers. These are held on a weekday evening and a Saturday morning. Though not mandatory they are an important part of adoption practice and offer enquirers a chance to hear more about the process and listen to the lived experiences of an adoptive parent.

Stage 1

In stage 1 there has been 1 withdrawal by the prospective adopter following a safeguarding concern

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.

In this period 5 ICP training courses were held with 35 attendees. DCC adoption staff facilitated 2 of the 5 courses, with TfC facilitated 3. 1 course due to be facilitated by DCC was cancelled in August due to low numbers.

Stage 2

In this reporting period, 9 adoptive families were approved. At the end of this reporting period, there were 9 prospective adopter households in Stage 1, 4 in stage 2 pending (applicants can choose to have up to 6 months break between stages 1 and 2) and 4 prospective adopters in Stage 2.

During this period 5 prospective adoptive (households) withdrew from stage 2 and the adoption process. This is quite unusual and therefore the circumstances of each case were considered for agency learning.

During Stage 2, prospective adopters were previously invited to attend an optional half day training session providing information about Early Permanence (EP). Following the start of a pan regional project, this training is now 2 days and mandatory for any prospective adopter wishing to consider EP as a route to becoming adoptive parents. The partner agencies all provide the same training which not only provides consistency of expectation of EP carers but also allows for Adopt Coast to Coast prospective adopters to attend the training hosted by a partner agency if their dates are more convenient.

It is positive to note that following recent awareness raising with Families First's Teams there has been a notable increase in requests for an EP carer; this is a key priority for Children's Services. Children moving to live with a family who could become their adoptive family should an adoption plan for permanence be ratified by the Court is in the child's best interests.

As part of the stage 2 assessment process the adoption support worker offers sessions to cover child development on a 1-1 basis in the prospective adopter's home if the assessing social worker identifies this as a development need. This is good practice and not a statutory requirement.

The training offer in stage 2 also includes day 4 of the ICP mandatory training, Therapeutic Parenting Training. This is delivered monthly with TfC and offers

prospective adopters an opportunity to understand the challenges of re-parenting children who have experienced loss and trauma and how therapeutic parenting can help the child with their emotional healing.

Of the 5 training days held within this period, 2 were facilitated by DCC and 3 by TfC staff; August was cancelled due to low numbers.

The training offer has been extended in this period to include Paediatric First Aid (22 attendees) and Theraplay (17 attendees).

Adoption Panel/Independent Reviewing Mechanism

2 Adoption Panel Chairs are independently employed and are supported by a Vice Chair.

Adoption Panel have been held 11 times over this 6-month period. The Panel is held fortnightly and additional panels are arranged when necessary to prevent delays for children. No additional panels were required in this period.

The 11 panels have considered and recommended:

- Approval of 6 prospective adopters.
- The plan of adoption for a relinquished baby.
- 20 children matched with approved adopters.

All panel recommendations for children 's matches were ratified by the ADM within the statutory timescale of 7 days following panel.

5 of the 6 approvals to become adopters were recommended and ratified with 1 deferred for further health information. This related to historic health records not being available for 1 applicant formerly resident in Ireland. At the end of this reporting period, this issue remained ongoing.

The quality of reports continues to be of a high standard and this has been validated by panel members and panel chairs.

The training requirement for panel members was met in this period by the delivery of Initial Referral to Adoption Process (pre-birth) and the CP Processes in August 2023.

Additional development opportunities were provided by the Agency Adviser through the provision of a variety of literature, research, practice updates and information.

All panel member annual appraisals for 2023 have been completed.

A priority remains the recruitment of new panel members to increase the central list. In the last year 2 potential new panel members have been interviewed and the statutory checks are underway. However, 3 panel members resigned in the same period due to personal circumstances. Despite best efforts the agency has not been able to recruit elected members.

Following concerns being raised by the LADO, a previously approved prospective adopter withdrew from the adoption process before being matched.

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

The Child's Journey

In this reporting period -

- 32 children had an ADM decision for a plan of adoption, in the previous year this was 26.
- 27 children have become subject to a Placement Order, compared to 23 in the previous year.
- 20 children were matched compared to 31 in the previous year.
- 14 of these children being matched within the RAA; of which 12 matches were with DCC approved adopters, 2 matches were with prospective adopters from our partner spoke. In the previous year for this period 3 children were matched within the RAA but external to DCC.
- 6 matches were with Voluntary Adoption Agencies. In comparison to the same period in the previous year 12 matches were with external agencies from the RAA.
- 1 child has been placed via Early Permanence.
- 25 Adoption Orders have been granted for DCC children within this period.
- 8 DCC children are still living with DCC adopters but not yet adopted.
- There have been no disruptions in this period.

Family Finding

Profiling Events/Activity Days have been held, facilitated, or attended by DCC staff.

1 activity day has been facilitated by DCC staff which was held in September 2023. DCC and TFC children attended with their foster carers. There was good attendance with some interest shown in the children, however none have progressed to matching. The DCC children who attended the activity day were those where matching is not progressing within the RAA. This can be for various reasons such as health, emotional, behavioural issues, older aged children or for children to be adopted with their brothers and/or sisters.

Post Box contact

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

A total of 277 letters were received in this period.

Support is also provided by the Adoption Support Worker to birth mothers who are engaging with the PAUSE project. 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 to ensure they receive their letters in return.

Post Adoption Support Services

There continues to be a significant increase in requests for adoption support services which are a statutory requirement for each Local Authority. This includes access to adoption records by adopted adults and support for children and adopters due to the child's past traumas. This usually results in adoption support fund applications being made following an assessment of need.

In this period, there were 119 active post adoption support cases in the adoption team and 64 successful applications were made to the Adoption Support Fund.

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

Where parents request a referral be made to Full Circle, that Team complete the assessment of need, which is approved by the Adoption Team Manager and business support for Full Circle submit the application on the ASF portal for funding for the therapeutic intervention.

To support new adoptive parents, funding can be sourced from ASF for a place on the Nurturing and Attachments course offered by 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 adoption support as the child grows.

Support, advice, and counselling to birth parents and those affected by adoption. 23 birth parents / grandparents have requested and received support regarding their children's/grandchildren's adoption from the Adoption Support Worker in this period.

The adoption support worker offers support to birth family members whose children are in Care Proceedings with a plan of adoption or following the granting of an Adoption Order. The uptake of this is sporadic. Approximately 25 birth family members have sought some form of support with the adoption support worker in his period.

The adoption support worker is also the 'keeping in touch' champion for the team. This involves liaising with other adoption services and attending national webinars relating to the development of openness in adoption. Modernising adoption is a priority for Adopt Coast to Coast.

Access to records for adopted adults wishing to access their adoption records is undertaken by Adoption Social Workers, 16 adopted adults have requested this service in this period.

Life appreciation days were reinstated during is period. They are co-ordinated and facilitated by the family support worker in the Permanence Team and the adoption support worker.

Adopt Coast to Coast continue to host social events and in this period an Easter and a Summer party have been held. These opportunities bring adoptive families together to share experiences, they are a very popular events; feedback is very positive.

Non-Agency Adoption

The number of referrals and complexities of this area of adoption work are increasing.

In this reporting period there have been:

- 5 initial visits completed, with 3 resulting in an assessment commencing.
- 6 Adoption Orders have been granted. It is noticeable that court proceedings are taking longer, often with several hearings before the Order is granted.
- 3 completed assessments are waiting to be finalised at court.

- 2 assessments are completed, with applications about to be submitted to court.
- 9 assessments are ongoing although not all will result in the families making an application to court.

Signs of Safety/Signs of wellbeing/success

The Adoption Team staff continue to attend Signs of Safety training sessions delivered by DCC's Learning and Development Department 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.

Updated key priority areas for 2023/24:

- To continue to work collaboratively with our partner 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 carers 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, particularly Elected Members.

Barbara Arbon

Adoption Team Manager

November 2023