

**Adoption Team Annual Report
April 1 2023 – March 31 2024**



A hand made Thank You card from the birth child of an adopter

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Durham County Council Adoption Service

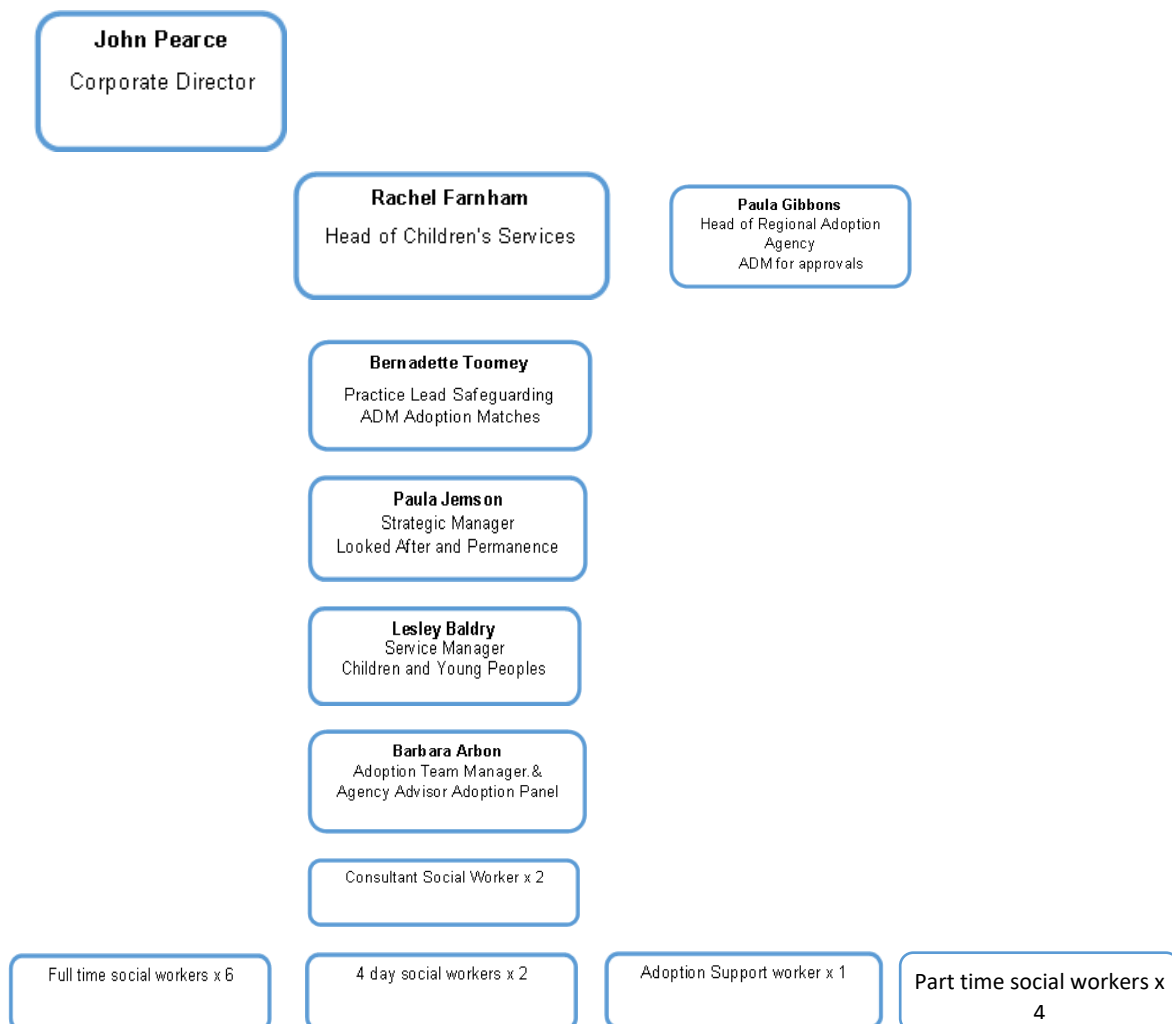
1. Introduction

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).

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.

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 2023 covering April to September 2023. This report considers the full financial year, 1st April 2023 to March 31st 2024.

2. Durham Adoption Team Staffing



- Due to staff sickness and additional work within the adoption team such as the increased workload within the arena of Post Adoption Support applications and non- agency adoptions, there have been 2 full time and 1 part time agency social workers employed within the team over this year, 1 full time and 1 part time remain in post until September 2024.
- 2 x student Social Workers have been provided with placements within the team over this period.
- The Adoption Team has recruited 1 part time Social Worker within this period, who is yet to commence her role.
- 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.

3. Recruitment

3.1 Enquiries, information sessions and Initial visits

- 115 initial enquires. 35 enquiries progressed to an initial visit. This is a decrease from the previous year of 267 initial enquiries which resulted in 80 initial visits. The reduction is in part due the marketing post being vacant for 3 months whilst the recruitment process was concluded. The cost of living crisis is also believed to have contributed to recruitment challenges. Responsibility for leading on recruitment is held with the RAA hub and enquiry numbers are monitored monthly. For enquiries who do not respond to communication from the adoption social worker 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.
- 22 information sessions held via Teams and facilitated on evenings and Saturdays by DCC and TFC social workers. Attendance is not mandatory. The aim is to provide further basic information to assist the applicant in deciding if adoption is what they wish to do. An adoptive parent shares their journey, this is valued by those attending These events are usually attended pre-Stage 1.

3.2 Stage 1

Training for prospective adopters

Mandatory 3-day Information, counselling, and preparation courses (ICP) have been delivered. This is not mandatory for current foster carers or 2nd time adopters-

- Between April and December DCC and TFC facilitated the ICP training with workers from the same spoke. From January 2024 the training has been delivered by one DCC worker and one TFC worker.
- There were monthly sessions planned, 9 took place with DCC facilitating 3 sessions, TFC 3 sessions and DCC and TFC jointly 3 sessions.

3.3 Stage 2

- 15 adoptive households approved. This is a decrease from the previous year where 41 households were approved as outlined within recruitment above.
- At the end of this reporting period, there were 12 prospective adopter households in Stage 1.

3.4 Training in stage 2

- Optional 2-day training session with a focus on Early Permanence (EP). Within the stage 1 ICP training EP is covered, providing an overview, which allows participants the insight necessary to decide if they wish to consider this route to adoption. Should a prospective adopter be clear they do not wish to become parents via this route they can opt to not attend in stage 2. However, should EP be a route they choose the training is mandatory. 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.
- 8 households were approved who wished to consider early permanence as a possible option.
- 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 supports the attendees to help the child with their emotional healing.
- Paediatric first aid training has been delivered, provided by a qualified expert in this field.

4. Panel

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.

In the last year we have successfully recruited 3 new panel members however, 3 panel members have resigned due to their own circumstances.

4.1 What was presented to panel in this period:

- 41 matches for children with prospective adopters of which 5 were sibling groups of 2. All matches were recommended and subsequently ratified by ADM.
- 15 adopter approvals were considered. 15 adoptive families were recommended and latterly ratified by ADM.

The quality of reports being presented to panel continues to be of a very high standard. Panel members and Chairs have regularly provided positive feedback to Social Workers, their Managers and Senior Managers.

Below is a compliment received by a panel chair:

I'm emailing to let you know about the quality of the work undertaken with the above children, particularly by the social workers involved in the Keeping in Touch agreement. Great thought has been put into how best to maintain and develop their relationship through keeping in touch and this has resulted in a range of methods being used including physically meeting up but also using cards, videos and letters in between directly seeing each other. On behalf of panel, please pass on to all those concerned our thanks for the hard work being done for these children and their prospective adopters.

4.2 Training and development for panel members and chairs

- Panel members have also received face-to-face training within this period held together with the RAA partners. The training related to the matching process for children with adults.
- DCC panel members also received a hybrid training session on the safeguarding process.
- 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.
- Adoption Service Manager attends some panel meetings and provides updates to the panel on service developments.
- Bi-annual Adoption Panel Meetings were held attended by the strategic, service and team managers of the adoption service. Views of panel members on the panel process and quality of reports are shared and any developments are agreed.

- Panel Members had their annual appraisals from April to June 2023, undertaken by Barbara Arbon jointly with either Sandie Dixon or Barbara Brelsford. Panel chair appraisals were also carried out by ADM.

4.3 Adoption Panel/Independent Reviewing Mechanism

Adoption Panel has been held 22 times over this 12-month period. Panel is held fortnightly, and additional panels held when necessary to prevent delays for children. 1 of the 22 panels held was an additional panel. No applicants have been presented to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM) within this year.

5. The Child's Journey

- In this reporting period, 83 children had an ADM decision for a plan of adoption, in the previous year this was 60.
- 65 Children have been granted a Placement Order, compared to 54 in the previous year.
- In this period, 40 children were matched at Panel. This is a decrease from the previous year of 58 children being matched.
- 29 of these children being matched within the RAA; of which 21 matches were with DCC approved adopters, 8 matches were with prospective adopters from our partner spoke.
- 12 matches were with other Local Authorities, RAA's or Voluntary Adoption Agencies.
- This is a decrease from the previous year, where 17 children were placed with external providers.
- 51 Adoption Orders have been granted for DCC children within this period. An increase on the previous year where 43 Adoption Orders were granted.
- 18 children are living with prospective adopters but not yet adopted.
- 12 children's plans were changed from adoption to long-term fostering.

No disruptions have happened within this period.

6. Budgets

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

- DCC placed 6 children with 6 approved adoptive households from our partner spoke TFC.
- 24 DCC children were placed with 23 approved DCC adoptive households.
- TFC placed 2 children with 2 DCC approved adoptive households.
- 2 children from 2 other Local Authorities were matched with DCC adopters.
- 19 children were placed externally to Adopt Coast to Coast with inter-agency fees costing £342,284 which is a decrease from the previous year's cost of £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.

7. Family Finding

Fortnightly family finding meetings have been held with our partner spoke to consider children with plans of adoption and adopters who are approved or in assessment that may be suitable matches for DCC children. Early matching is key in preventing delays for children.

Profiling events/activity days have been held and facilitated or attended by DCC staff. Manager consent is needed before a child can be either taken to an activity day, their profile shared at a profiling event or with adoption agencies external to coast to coast. 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 tend to be those with additional health and/or disability needs, older children and sibling groups. However external searches have been needed for children who in the past would have been easier to find adoptive homes for.

7.1 Activity days

- 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.

- DCC hosted 1 activity day in September 2023. From DCC there were 4 families of 2 children and 1 family of 3 children. Of these DCC children a brother and sister progressed to a match.
- Due to a national shortage of adopters the next planned Adopt Coast to Coast activity day in January 2024 was cancelled.

7.2 Profiling events

- Profiling events are 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.
- DCC have hosted 1 profiling event this year in May 2023. 2 further Adopt Coast to Coast profiling events were planned for November and January but were cancelled, again due to a national shortage of adopters.

7.3 Early Permanence (EP)

- 7 children have been placed in this arrangement. 2 x DCC EP carers, 4 x TfC EP carers, 1 x external voluntary adoption agency EP carers.
- 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 a senior manager.

Further regular weekly monitoring is undertaken by the adoption team manager and adoption social work consultants, The tracker is viewed fortnightly by the Service Manager.

There is a focus within Children Waiting Meetings held jointly with our RAA spoke colleagues fortnightly to identify children who could be placed under Early Permanence and match with adopters at an early a stage as possible.

8. Keeping in touch – formerly known as Post Box contact

Keeping in touch continues to improve with the Adoption Support Worker and named Business Support Worker allocated to ensure letters are processed and uploaded

promptly between adopters, birth family and the children. Work remains ongoing to complete the final uploads of historic letters to LCS records. Historic indirect contact agreements have now been completed and uploaded to LCS.

- DCC have 713 keeping in touch agreements in place, of which 420 letters were sent in either by birth family members or by adopters. Each letter was reviewed to ensure they were appropriate before sending on to the recipient.
- 188 birth parents have been supported in writing their keeping in touch letters. This has been facilitated in various ways including one to one work with birth parents to write their letters, occasionally with parents who themselves are not able to read or write.
- The adoption support worker has managed to re-establish keeping in touch between some birth parents and their children and has also established not only indirect keeping in touch between some children, but also direct, which has been extremely positive.

9. 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.

9.1 Adoption Support and Special Guardianship Fund assessments

This area of work has been increasing nationally over the last few years and does have an impact as stated previously on adoption social workers case load capacity.

- 151 children have been supported through successful 'assessments of need' completed by Social Workers within the Adoption team. This is an increase from 94 the previous, this is a 61% increase.
- 152 claims were made to the Adoption Support Fund on behalf of children in need of therapeutic support relating to adoption issues. This is an increase on the 116 from the previous year. This equates to an increase of 31%.
- Total Amount for Approved claims by the ASGSF 2023/24 = £571,554

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.

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.

9.1 Access to Adoption Records

Access to records for adopted adults wishing to access their adoption records. Is undertaken by Adoption Social Workers.

- 34 adopted adults have requested this service

9.2 Non-Agency Adoption

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

In this reporting period there have been:

- 19 enquiries were responded to, with 15 resulting in an assessment commencing.
- 8 Adoption Orders have been granted.
- All assessments completed have progressed to applications being made to court.
- 13 assessments are ongoing.

9.3 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 granted. The Adoption Support Allowance is means tested and is reviewed annually.

- 119 children received ASA.

10. Key priority areas for 2023/24

- Focus on the importance of relationship-based practice where an adoption social worker who takes an initial enquiry from a potential adopter maintains the allocation throughout the assessment process where possible. This is to allow consistent trusting relationships to be built and try and prevent a drop off after the initial enquiry.

- To work collaboratively with our partners in Adopt Coast to Coast to recruit, assess and approve adopters in a timely manner. Identifying any challenges to ensuring that timescales are met within stage 1 and stage 2 of the assessment process and working with partners such as the police and health to overcome those barriers.
- Continue with the review of the matching process to ensure the process in Durham and TFC are in line with each other, that this progresses as quickly as possible and that there is robust information gathered, shared and recorded about the match of possible adopters to children.
- To ensure children's plans of permanence via adoption are progressed at an early a stage as possible and to develop a new process to assist with the identification and tracking of these children. Work alongside TFC to share information at Children Waiting Meetings about unborn children who could be placed in Early Permanence from birth and match them with adopters going through the assessment process who could be approved before the child is born.
- 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 provide high quality post adoption support to adopted children and young adults, supporting them to access therapy via the Adoption Support Fund. Consideration to be given to the structure of the adoption team and whether Post Adoption Support should be managed differently.
- To enhance and develop keeping in touch for adopted children and their birth families, ensuring that where possible relationships with birth families are built with adopters to facilitate different forms of keeping in touch such as more children adopted spending some direct time with birth family members.

Barbara Arbon
Adoption Team Manager
April 2024

Appendix 1

Adopt Coast to Coast 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024 Panel Chair reflections for this reporting year

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 information 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!

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. We are pleased to see the evidence of good direct work with children, including the children of prospective adopters, shown through drawings and letters attached to reports.

Adoption support services are likely to be crucial to the success of the placement, we note that Adoption Support Plans have greatly improved. They are more individualised, detailed, creative and well explained.

We are seeing impressive planning for introductions, intended to support families and children through the transition to adoptive families. This often includes examples of real dedication by foster carers.

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.

The process for Early Permanence is now well embedded, with oversight from senior managers but where Early Permanence is not progressed the rationale is not always clear in the paperwork.

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, a recognised issue with panel members being mainly White British and predominantly female.

Last year's reflection regarding Keeping in Touch arrangements raised some significant concerns. We are pleased to report that there has been a real improvement. There is increasing focus on the importance of assessing what arrangement is right for a child, and developments in technology are starting to enable the team to be more creative in how they consider facilitating Keeping in Touch arrangements.

It is our experience that prospective adopters are open to maintaining Keeping in Touch arrangements. This is particularly evident with arrangements to keep in touch with foster carers whose knowledge of and support to the child is valued and appreciated by them.

Medical advisers continue to provide detailed and informative medical summaries worded so that complex information is presented in a way that helps non medical panel members understand it

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. Excellent 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.