

Durham County Council's Adoption Team Bi-Annual report

1 April – 30 September 2024



**Durham Adoption Team - a partner in
Adopt Coast to Coast**

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Durham County Council Adoption Service

This bi-annual report covers all adoption activity within Durham County Council between the 1 April 2024 and 30 September 2024. The Durham Adoption Team continues 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.

The Statement of Purpose for Durham Adoption Service was updated in April 2024, reviewed by Durham'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 2025.

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 July 2024 covering the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

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 Paula Jemson.
- The Service Manager for Adoption is Lesley Baldry.
- Durham County Council 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 Adoption in Durham and the Regional Adoption Agency Head of Service.
- Barbara Arbon is the Adoption Team Manager and Adoption Agency Advisor.
- Two Consultant Social Workers
- Seven full time Social Workers.

- Three part time Social Workers.
- Two 4-day week Social Workers.
- One Adoption Support Worker
- One vacant part time Social Worker post was converted to a full-time post and recruited to at interviews in mid-September.
- The Adoption Team continue to offer placements for student social workers and one completed their placement during the period of this report.

Recruitment

- In this period, Durham has received 52 initial enquires. This converted to 34 initial visits being completed in this timeframe. A conversion of 65%. This is an increase from the same period in the previous year where we received 43 initial enquiries, of which only 19 (44%) progressed to an initial visit.
- There are varying reasons why not all prospective adopters progress to an initial interview after making an enquiry. As a service we continue to monitor the reasons for not proceeding to ensure the marketing activity is giving the right messages. There are a number of enquiries we are unable to contact despite our best efforts, some withdraw as they made the enquiry in error, some experience a change in circumstances, and some do not respond to the workers attempts to contact them. It is not uncommon in adoption for enquirers to make contact with us as part of information gathering in their very early stages of considering adoption and after receiving this, they may decide the time is not right.
- Twelve virtual information sessions have been held via Teams, these were facilitated equally by Durham County Council and Together for Children Social Workers. These are held on weekday evenings 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. A total of 29 people attended a session during this reporting period.

Stage One (A two-month period to complete statutory checks and provide initial training)

Information, counselling, and preparation courses have been delivered monthly on a shared basis between the spoke's adoption teams. The training takes place over three consecutive full days.

In this period five training courses were held with a total of 45 attendees.

Stage Two (A four-month period for completion of the assessment, presentation to the Adoption Panel and decision as to suitability by the Agency Decision Maker)

In this reporting period, 12 adoptive families were approved as adopters. At the end of this reporting period, there were also 12 prospective adopter households in Stage One, three in Stage Two pending (applicants can choose to have up to six months break between Stages One and Two). There were also nine prospective adopters in Stage Two.

Three of the prospective adopters were being assessed to adopt named children. They have a connection to the child either as current foster carers or second time adopters for a younger brother or sister of a child they have already adopted.

Stage Two also includes additional training.

- **Early Permanence** - prospective adopters wishing to consider adoption via the Early Permanence route are mandated to attend a specific training course delivered over two days. As part of the pan regional Early Permanence Project, the training was developed jointly by the seven adoption agencies to support consistency of expectation. As each agency delivers the same training this enables prospective adopters wishing to be Early Permanence carers to attend any course across the region. This training has been delivered three times by Adopt Coast to Coast in the reporting period of this report.
- **Therapeutic Parenting** - this is day four of the information, counselling and preparation course. Unlike the other courses offered across Adopt Coast to Coast, this is currently delivered monthly either by Durham County Council or Together for Children staff. It is planned that facilitation will move to a staff member from each spoke to mirror delivery of the other courses. This session offers prospective adopters an opportunity to understand how adverse childhood experiences are shown in children's presenting behaviours and how they can parent

therapeutically. In this reporting period six sessions have been held with 45 applicants attending.

- **Theraplay principles and Paediatric First Aid** are optional courses offered to our prospective adopters. Theraplay offers prospective adopters practical tips and practice of playful, fun and nurturing activities which are designed to build healthy relationships between children and parents. Paediatric First Aid offers prospective adopters' confidence in appropriately responding to childhood accidents and injuries.

As part of the Stage Two assessment process the Adoption Support Worker offers sessions to cover child development and parenting work 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. 16 families have accessed these consultations during this reporting period.

Adoption Panel/Independent Reviewing Mechanism

Two experienced and independent Adoption Panel Chairs are supported by a Vice Chair.

The Adoption Panel has been held 13 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 13 panels have considered and recommended:

- Approval of 12 prospective adoptive families.
- 29 children matched with approved adopters.
- One recommendation for adoption of a relinquished baby.
- One recommendation of Scottish approved adopters being matched with a County Durham child. This is a legal requirement for all English Regional Adoption Agencies/Local Authorities due to a difference between English and Scottish Adoption regulations.

Development opportunities were provided to panel members and chairs by the Agency Adviser in the form of a variety of literature, research, practice updates and information sent electronically and discussed verbally at the end of each panel.

All panel member annual appraisals for 2024 have been completed.

A priority remains the recruitment of new panel members to increase the central list. This includes a focus on increasing panel members who are Social

Workers who are independent of the adoption team. In this period five new panel members have been interviewed and the statutory checks are underway. No panel members have resigned in the same period.

No prospective adopters have sought to attend the Independent Reviewing Mechanism within this period.

The Child's Journey

In this reporting period -

- 40 children had an Agency Decision Maker decision for a plan of adoption, in the previous period this was 32.
- 38 children have become subject to a Placement Order, compared to 27 in the previous period.
- 28 children were matched compared to 20 in the previous period.
- 15 of these children being matched within the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA); of which ten matches were with Durham County Council approved adopters, five matches were with prospective adopters approved by Together for Children. This is a reduction of nine from the same period in 2023.
- 12 matches were with prospective adopters approved by a Voluntary Adoption Agency. An increase of eight from the same period in 2023. In comparison to the same period in the previous year six matches were with external agencies from the RAA.
- One child was placed with another RAA.
- Five children have been placed via Early Permanence. Three of these children are now living with their prospective adopters under adoption regulations. This is the same number of children placed via Early Permanence in the same reporting period last year.
- 22 Adoption Orders have been granted for County Durham children within this period.
- 32 County Durham children are still living with their prospective adopters but not yet adopted.

As part of matching, Life Appreciation days are co-ordinated and facilitated by the Family Support Worker in the Permanence Team and the Adoption Support Worker. Life Appreciation days are held for children who are part of a sibling group, over three years of age or who have had multiple moves in foster care. They allow adopters an opportunity to talk to all the professionals who have been involved in a child's life and build a lovely picture of who they are. There have been six Life Appreciation days held for ten children.

Family Finding

Profiling Events and Activity Days have been held, facilitated, or attended by Durham County Council staff.

One profiling event has been facilitated by Durham County Council staff, this was held in April 2024. Children's profiles from each partner agency were shared, and their foster carers and Social Worker's attended to speak to prospective adopters. There was good attendance with some interest shown in the children, however none have yet progressed to matching.

No activity days were facilitated by the RAA within this timeframe. This was due to a decision being made to hold these events pan regionally on a larger scale. The first one organised during this period was held on 5 October 2024. This will be reported on in the annual report.

One profiling event was attended by Durham County Council and Together for Children Family Finding staff which was facilitated by Coram BAAF in July 2024 in London. The profiles of children where matching has been more difficult due to their particular matching needs and searches via the national family finding portal, Link Maker, had not been successful were shared. Due to the distance foster carers and children's social workers were not present. There was good attendance by prospective adopters, with some interest shown in the children, however none have yet progressed to matching. There are for various reasons for this, but it is predominantly because the prospective adopters expressed interest in more than one child featured at the event and after receiving more information have chosen to pursue matches with children from other local authorities.

Keeping in Touch (formerly known as Post Box contact)

28 birth parents and grandparents have been supported in writing their Keeping in Touch letter or understanding the process.

A total of 289 letters were received in this period.

12 sets of adoptive parents for 14 children have been supported to meet up directly with the adopters of their children's birth brothers and sisters. The aim is for this to progress to the children meeting. Each one needs to be done in a

way that meets all of the children's needs. The use of WhatsApp is a popular method of starting such communication.

A care experienced young person from County Durham became involved in the development of Keeping in Touch in August 2024. This work is in the early stages. However, the engagement has already resulted in County Durham and the other two Regional Adoption Agencies considering how they may change their communication with care experienced young people in the planning and maintaining of relationships where some of their brothers and sisters have been adopted.

At the end of August 2024 data was gathered in respect of this and it was identified that Durham County Council has 76 children and young people in its care who have adopted brothers and sisters. Work is underway to identify if the Keeping in Touch is ongoing or if support is needed to re-establish it. The Adoption Support Worker will be offering this support to those who are identified as needing it.

As part of this work, the care experienced young person is also assisting in the rewording of Keeping in Touch reminder letters that are sent out to adopters and birth family members including brothers and sisters. It is vital we embrace the lived experiences of people receiving these letters to ensure they are written in such a way that encourages Keeping in Touch to continue. There will be opinions sought from adopters regarding these letters to also inform the writing style.

Post Adoption Support Services

There continues to be a significant increase in requests for post 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 applications to the national Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund which is funded by the Department for Education.

In this period, there were 184 active post adoption support cases in the adoption team. 133 successful applications were granted by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund for therapeutic intervention.

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

In May 2024 the Regional Adoption Agency launched a Stay and Play support group for prospective adopters who have had a child placed with them in the last 12 months. Adoptive families can continue to attend, should they be able, after their adoption leave has ended. Durham County Council staff facilitate

this support group. Together for Children facilitate the Early Permanence support group for those prospective adopters hoping to become or are already Early Permanence carers across the RAA and for those approved by other agencies and with a County Durham or Sunderland child living with them.

In this period five Stay and Play sessions have been held and each attended by between six and nine prospective adopters with between six and eight children. Guest speakers are also invited to attend, for example a representative from the Virtual School was able to answer questions around education. As one of the facilitators is the Adoption Support Worker, they are able to offer 1-1 guidance and support on Keeping in Touch, child development and parenting queries.

Access to adoption records

Access to records for adopted adults wishing to access their adoption records is undertaken by Adoption Social Workers, 18 adopted adults have requested this service in this period.

Non-Agency Adoption

Non-Agency Adoptions involve a person who lives with the child wishing to apply to adopt that child. This could include a stepparent, family member or family friend.

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

In this reporting period there have been:

- 12 initial visits completed all of which have resulted in an assessment commencing. These are all now at varying stages of their adoption journey.
- Five Adoption Orders have been granted. It is noticeable that court proceedings are taking longer, often with several hearings before the Order is granted. This is often due to the complexities surrounding the application, often including the birth parent moving to the UK from another country.

Updated key priority areas for 2024/25:

- To continue to work collaboratively with our partner in Adopt Coast to Coast to recruit, assess and approve prospective 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.
- Ensure that assessments of prospective adopters progress within timescales in particular in stage 1 of the adoption process.
- Build on the Post Adoption Support offer including upskilling adoption social workers to offer support such as Theraplay.
- To continue to recruit new Panel members to the Central List, particularly Elected Members.

Barbara Arbon

Adoption Team Manager

October 2024