



Durham County Council

Adoption Service

**Annual Report of the Adoption Service
and Adoption Panels**

1ST April 2016 - 31ST March 2017



INTRODUCTION

The Adoption Service continues to focus on achieving the best outcomes for children and to prevent delay in achieving permanence for the child with a plan of adoption and children remain the focus and the centre of the service in all areas.

The information presented in this report relates to the activity within Durham County Council's Adoption Service and the activity of the two Adoption Panels.

The report will consider performance during the reporting period from 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017 and will highlight

- Key activities and achievements of the Adoption Service and Adoption Panels
- Significant changes in adoption practice in England and Wales
- Strategic Priorities for 2017-2018

VISION, VALUES AND AIMS OF DURHAM ADOPTION TEAM

The Adoption Service's vision, values and aims are:

- Our core value is that the child is at the centre of all our work and we want the best for Looked After Children, as if they were our own.

We seek to:

- Be the best, most approachable, most responsive, most professional and most supportive Adoption Service in the region.
- Be the highest quality Adoption Service that people choose.
- Value and celebrate the diversity, differences and background of our potential adopters.
- Be respectful, flexible, honest and transparent in the manner we work with prospective adopters, children and young people, and professionals from within the service and multi-agencies.
- Be a highly skilled and experienced team, with excellent mix of knowledge, skills and abilities, seeking continual improvement in everything we do.
- Promote and provide a robust post adoption support service for all affected by adoption.
- Maximise use of technology and social media to enable us to be competitive in the changing face of adoption work and to improve our effectiveness and efficiency.

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN ADOPTION: EXTERNAL DRIVERS

This past year has been marked by the following significant changes:

Regionalising Adoption

Discussions have continued with regard to Regionalisation, which culminated in March 2017 with a Practice Improvement Framework (PIF) bid being submitted, with After Adoption as the lead agency. This bid detailed the proposal that Durham County Council Adoption Service, with Cumbria County Council Adoption Service and Sunderland (now 'Together for Children' registered as a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) for adoption), along with the 4 existing voluntary agencies of After Adoption, Barnardos, ARC and DFW Adoption, should set up a collaboration with a view to forming a Regional Organisation in the future. No response is expected until at least September 2017 due to the general election.

Plans to move towards this collaboration are in the early stages, however, all parties are committed to ensuring that any impact on children and families is positive.

Adoption Support

The Adoption Support Fund was changed to include children subject to Special Guardianship (September 2016) and to introduce a 'fair access limit' (December 2016) this is to ensure that funds are utilised in the best way possible, so that children and families receive the support that they need. Any therapeutic support now has a limit of £5000 per child per annum or has to be match funded by the local authority and is available from placement of the child into their adoptive family until the child reaches the age of 18. For the period in question, the service has claimed £101,137.01 for 32 children/families with a further £20,392.50 being claimed following assessment of children's post adoption support needs from external therapeutic organisation/ training (8 children/families)

'Adoption – a vision for change'. This published white paper policy document confirmed the government's determination to radically reform Adoption Services 'by the end of this parliament'.

In Court, final plans of adoption have continued to be delayed due to birth parents seeking to appeal the granting of the Placement Order prior to placement, or seeking to oppose the granting of an Adoption Order once the prospective adopters make their application to adopt. Contested adoptions increase anxiety for prospective adopters as they await the outcome of a court decision prior to proceeding and this causes an increase in the number of days children remain Looked After prior to the making of a final order.

Fewer adopters have been recruited this year, not only within County Durham but nationally. A new targeted Recruitment and Marketing Plan has been developed in order to seek to address this. There has been a reduction in numbers of prospective adopters presented to the Adoption Panel and a reduction in the number of approved adopters over the year.

The adoption team continues to ensure that only adopters who have the necessary skills to meet the needs of children with a plan of adoption are presented to panel for approval. The reduction in the number of available adopters has significantly impacted on the work of the team and made family finding much more difficult and

has also increased the number of inter-agency placements during this reporting period. Whilst the team continue to ensure that placements are sought at the earliest opportunity for the child, this has involved seeking approved adopters from all over the country in order to meet the individual needs of the children. Although this is in line with the government agenda to reduce delay, it does mean that children are being more often placed outside the north east region.

Fostering For Adoption

Children are placed prior to the granting of a Placement Order with families who are resilient enough to manage the complex task of fostering the child throughout Care Proceedings, with the child being 'placed for adoption' only following the granting of the Placement Order. This enables the child to build attachments with their permanent carers from an early age and aims to reduce the risks of attachment issues when children move on to an adoptive placement. This places the risk firmly on the adopters and their family, as a court may not agree to the plan of adoption for the child and may decide to return the child to the care of birth family.

Fostering for Adoption is a key strategic priority and key area of improvement for the service and this practice will be embedded into the service during 2017-2018. Fostering for Adoption continues to be discussed with all prospective adopters during training and assessment. Until recently there has been little interest in this form of adoption, as enquirers feel they are unable to take the risk of a court deciding to return the child to their birth family. Despite this, this area continues to be pursued by the Looked After Children and Permanence Service and will be promoted more actively during information and assessment processes over the next year.

The Adoption Service have developed printed information and the referral form to the team has been revised to ensure that Fostering for Adoption is considered by the child's social worker at the earliest opportunity and plans are already in place to access Approved Fostering for Adoption carers from Voluntary Agencies if this need cannot be met through DCC adopters.

The Adoption team will now receive early alert notifications from the Public Law Outline (PLO) Panel, so that Fostering for Adoption is considered at a much earlier point in the care planning process. This aims to increase early planning, increase placement stability, reduce the number of moves for children and ultimately achieve permanence as early as possible.

ADOPTION SERVICE AND ADOPTION PANELS' ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- The Head of Children's Services is Carole Payne.
- Karen Robb, Strategic Manager, for Looked After Children and Permanence Services, continued to serve as the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).
- Mark Gurney, Strategic Manager for Child Protection and Disability, served as ADM in the absence of Karen Robb as did Bronwen Smith (nee Keegan) to cover the long-term sickness absence of the Strategic Manager in 2016.
- In March 2017 Chris Bell was appointed as Operations Manager for Fostering, Adoption and Full Circle.

- Wendy Ellis is the Team Manager.
- There continues to be a core group of ten experienced social workers in the team.
- There were 22 Adoption Panel meetings during the period 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017.
- Stella Chambers has continued to serve as Adoption Panel Administrator, supported by Catherine Dawson.
- The Adoption Panels' Independent Chairs, Mary Greenwood and Barbara Brelsford, Agency Medical Agency/Vice-Chairman and Independent Panel Members continue to contribute to the training and preparation courses for prospective adopters.
- Appraisals for Adoption Panels members continue to be conducted annually and are all complete.
- Adoption Panel Training took place in 2016 in respect of recent changes in practice with regard to Family Finding. This was joint training with Panel Members and the Adoption Service/LAC Permanence Team in attendance.
- The Adoption Service reviewed its targeted Recruitment and Marketing Strategy for 2015-2018 and this has continued to be revisited and refined especially due to the decline in interest in Adoption and the increase in the numbers of Looked After Children in Durham
- Durham County Council continues to provide excellent adoption support services with therapeutic input from Dr Joyce Powell, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, and other members of the Full Circle Therapeutic Team.
- The number of children receiving post placement and post adoption financial support and allowance continues to be high. This group consists of children with identified complex needs and sibling groups. At 31st March 2017, 112 children's families were in receipt of an adoption allowance at an annual cost of £701,144. Each individual adoption allowance is reviewed on an annual basis and can be paid until a child is 18 or beyond where additional needs are identified.
- The majority of the children placed with prospective adopters enjoyed stability and security in their new permanent families. In spite of intensive social work and multi-agency support, one child's adoptive placement disrupted in 2016. A Disruption Meeting was held to consider why this happened and whether lessons can be learned for the future from this relatively rare event. Panel training is in the process of being arranged in order that all involved can evaluate and take learning from this report.
- The Annual Family Summer Fun Day took place in July 2016, and the popular Christmas Party was held in December 2016, where Santa made another welcome annual appearance. Both events were well received and attended by adopters and their children and families.

- On 18th March 2017 the service arranged a Future Families DVD event where 14 of the "harder to place children" (children in sibling groups or children with complex needs) were featured via DVD and an information stall. The featured children's social workers, fostering social workers and foster carers attended the event and waiting adopters were given the opportunity to find out detailed information about the children. At the time of writing this report the outcome is still being evaluated. Interest was expressed by prospective adopters in 8 of the children featured, however not all were suitable to meet those children's needs. Two links are progressing to match as a result of the event.
- The Adoption Service was also considered by OFSTED as part of their inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. The inspection commenced on 22nd February 2016 and concluded on 18th March 2016, with a final report being published on 16th May 2016. The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good with the following taken directly from the report itself;
 - *The adoption service in Durham is very child focused. Achieving a lifelong placement for children is at the heart of all practice. The adoption service is stable, experienced and well led. A dedicated senior practitioner effectively monitors and tracks the individual progress of children. This ensures that children awaiting placement are known to the managers and the team, keeping them at the forefront of the process. Progress of prospective adopters is also tracked. Since November 2015, this new system has had a positive impact in reducing the time between placement order and being matched. This is currently at 179 days, against a set target of 230 days.*
 - *All children who require an adoptive placement have a child permanence report completed by the LAC permanence team. This team has been in place since April 2014. The agency decision maker (ADM) and panel chair report that the quality of reports has improved over the past year. Permanence reports sampled by the inspectors were mainly good, with child-focused and reflective assessments.*
 - *Children are well prepared for adoption. All have personalised child-friendly timetables and information booklets to ensure that they are fully informed and involved in their plans. The adoption service has an established letter-box system, to coordinate indirect contact. This is sensitive to all and thorough in its processes. The later life letters seen are written in a clear and candid way that give a summary of the child's history. Life story work is child centred and includes all the people involved in a child's journey. The service is committed to ensuring that children receive Life Story Books by the time that the Adoption Order is made, and recognise this is as an area for improvement.*
 - *Children's needs are very well supported and assessed by the Full Circle service. This is a therapeutic service that is offered to all children looked after. This service is highly commended by all professionals and adopters who spoke with inspectors. To ensure that the right placements are requested for brothers and sisters, Full Circle workers complete a thorough assessment of each child's needs. All placement requests for brothers and sisters to stay together have been achieved in the past year. The Full Circle service is also involved in the training of prospective adopters. In addition, a clinical psychologist meets with all adopters before matching takes place. The needs of each child are holistically and realistically presented to the potential*

matched carers. This is supported by the work of the adoption team and has resulted in only one disruption in the past 12 months. The panel and the service reflected on this disruption to capture learning and consider any changes to improve services.

- *The national adoption scorecard measures the average length of time between children becoming looked after and being placed for adoption. Performance against this indicator is an improving picture. For 2014–15, a sizeable reduction of 102 days was achieved from the previous year, at 449 days. The latest information for this year shows a further positive reduction to 421 days, which is again below the national target.*
- *The local authority's recruitment strategy for adopters is not based on an analysis of predicted numbers, needs and profiles of children, which is an omission. However, the service attracts a large number of enquiries, and a broad range of recruitment activity is employed. Adopters are prepared and trained to a good standard. This training is currently being refreshed to ensure that it is inclusive to all potential adoptive families, reflects current practices and presents a realistic and balanced perspective on both positive and challenging aspects of adoption. Inspectors saw evidence of good-quality assessment practice. Adopters confirmed to inspectors that they are positive about the communication they had received following their initial enquiry, subsequent assessment visits, and training and support (Recommendation).*
- *The adoption service promotes the adoption register for adopters who have been approved by the panel if they are unable to be considered for a match immediately. There have been no fostering-to-adopt placements made, with only one placement available currently. This aspect of the service is in the early stages of development and is recognised by the authority as an area for further development.*
- *The quality of post-adoption support is good. The Full Circle service provides an accessible, timely and comprehensive range of therapeutic techniques to support children and families.*
- *The adoption panel is well managed and appropriately constituted. Feedback from adopters who have attended the panel is positive. It demonstrates effective oversight of adoption decisions and the approval of adopters. The chair of the panel and the agency decision maker, along with other key professionals, meet quarterly to discuss issues and challenges that have occurred. This ensures that the practice of the panel and service is informed by research and evidence-based practice. The adoption panel plays a key role in quality assurance, providing appropriate challenge and clear decision making.*

**RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS:
April 2016 - March 2017**

Table 1: Initial Enquiry

	April	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Initial Contact	15	11	17	8	14	13	16	15	11	29	13	13	175 (203)
Attendees at Information Events	4	2	1	1	2	6	8	0	2	10	6	6	48
Number of Enquiry Forms	6	3	12	6	9	5	4	15	4	10	7	7	88 (144)
Initial Visits	2	3	1	4	3	1	1	2	3	3	3	2	28 (45)
ROI Accepted	1	1	1	3	3	3	3	1	3	4	4	2	29 (37)
Training	-	-	-	6	-	4	0	4	0	6	0	8	28 (31)

(Previous year figures in brackets).

This table demonstrates the reduction in initial contacts that have been received over the period when compared with the previous 12 months. This led to a reduced number of enquiry forms, initial visits and ROI's accepted, with only 28 people attending training.

The service continues to ensure that enquiries are screened and evaluated thoroughly, which ensures that applicants are appropriate and suitable to progress. Following training it was discovered that a number of enquirers were not actually in a position to proceed with their application due to personal issues and these were placed on hold in accordance with procedures where applicants can take up to 6 month gap between Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the adoption process.

There has been a significant reduction in the interest in adoption over the last 12 months. The targeted Recruitment and Marketing Strategy has continued but has failed to generate sufficient interest from prospective adopters to apply to adopt with Durham County Council. The service continues to advertise continually on Durham's website and Facebook page as well as more broadly in the community. There has also been ongoing advertising for both fostering and adoption on Durham County Council's pool cars and buses. Staff also attended the recent Durham Pride Event where the Adoption Service was promoted and staff were in attendance to give information and advice.

The experience of Durham is not unusual in the local or national context. The number of children with complex needs has increased and the reduction in the availability of approved adopters has resulted in fewer suitable families when utilising the additional resources of Linkmaker and/or the Adoption Register.

Within the North East there are 2 other regional adoption agency proposals. Firstly, Adoption North East- Northumberland, Newcastle, North and South Tyneside and Gateshead, secondly, Adopt Teesside- Stockton, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland and Darlington. There is no proposal for wider collaborative work amongst the twelve Local Authorities in the North East Region as these groups work now within their own areas, despite the increase in Looked After children and therefore in the numbers of children with a plan of permanence via adoption.

Prospective Adopter Assessment

Recruitment Target

Durham County Council's Adoption Service aimed to recruit and approve enough families of prospective adopters during 2016/17 to meet the needs of Durham children with a plan of adoption and 22 adoptive families were approved last year. The reasons for this reduction in performance compared to the previous year due to a reduction in the numbers of enquiries from prospective adopters, and the majority wished to adopt a child without complex needs in order to become parents, often following issues with their own fertility.

A greater emphasis has been placed on ensuring that recruitment is targeted to the specific needs of children who require adoption, which it is hoped will improve performance in the coming year.

Table 2: Number of Prospective Adopters Approved 1st April 2016 – 31st March 2017

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Approvals	0	2	3	2	2	0	0	3	1	3	2	4	22
0-1 months	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1-3 months	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3-6 months	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	3	9
6-12 months	0	2	2	2	0	0	0	3	0	2	1	1	13
12 months +	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2015/16	0	4	2	4	5	1	4	4	3	3	4	1	35

This table shows the length of time between the ROI received and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) approval of prospective adopters as suitable to adopt. This demonstrates that the majority of adopters took longer than the 6 months, which is the Government requirement. Where timescales are extended this is due to a range of different reasons including;

- Medical concerns
- Applicants delay in providing information
- Applicants choosing to take a 6 month break between Stage 1 and Stage 2
- Applicants not making themselves available for assessment
- Disclosure and Barring Service issues and availability of panel.

The services are delivered by the Adoption Services and continue to be focussed on recruitment and training activities that are continuously reviewed to enable the recruitment of sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children who have a plan of adoption.

Inter-Agency Placements of children with DCC adopters

One Durham County Council approved adoptive family was matched with children from Sunderland generating income to the local authority. All other approved adopters have been matched to Durham Children.

Children Approved for Adoption

Table 3: Number of Children Approved for Adoption by Agency Decision Maker

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
2016/17	0	5	6	5	9	6	8	2	5	7	3	9	65
2015/16	10	1	10	6	3	5	3	0	5	2	6	2	53
2014/15	6	0	9	2	2	1	2	5	1	6	7	5	46
2013/14	11	6	14	4	7	5	7	4	4	2	3	0	67
2012/13	8	7	12	2	7	1	9	4	0	6	9	2	67

There has been a small increase in the number of looked after children in Durham approved for permanence through adoption compared to 2015/16 and 2014/15. However this small increase is in the context of a significant increase in the total number of Looked After Children during this period. This is indicative of the complex needs of the Looked After population and the challenges in making and securing Adoption Plans for these children.

Table 4: Children with a plan of adoption whose plans have changed.

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
2016/17	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	4

There is a significant reduction in the number of children's plans that changed away from adoption with only 4 compared to 19 in the previous year. This is mainly due to a change in the Courts who are again beginning to favour adoption as a positive choice for children who can no longer remain with their birth family.

Children with an Adoption Plan Waiting for Placement

As at 31 March 2017 there were 43 children with a plan of adoption awaiting placement

Number of children with Placement Order at 31 March 2017

There were 34 children who were the subject of a Placement Order

Number of children with Agency Decision Maker approval but awaiting a Placement Order 31 March 2017

There were 40 children with an agreed plan and for whom a Placement Order was not yet in place. This is again indicative of court imposed time-tabling which create delay in securing children's plans. There are also children placed and awaiting an order being made.

Matching

Table 5: Number of DCC Adopters Matched to a Child

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
2016/17	4	2	1	3	2	1	0	2	2	4	4	5	30
2015/16	1	3	1	2	7	5	7	2	4	1	3	1	37
2014/15	8	3	4	2	2	0	6	2	3	1	1	0	32
2013/14	4	7	3	2	3	4	0	5	6	1	5	6	46

Children Placed for Adoption

Table 6: Number of Children Placed for Adoption April 2016 – March 2017

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
DCC	1	4	1	4	2	0	1	3	4	4	3	5	32
DCC- FC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
VAA	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5
OLA	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
Total	2	4	1	7	5	0	2	3	4	5	3	7	43
2015/16	1	3	5	6	6	6	11	2	4	2	6	1	53
2014/15	10	3	5	2	2	0	4	6	4	0	1	0	37

Key: DCC – Durham County Council, VAA – Voluntary Adoption Agency, OLA – Other Local Authority, FC – Foster Carer

Due to the lack of available adopters within Durham, particularly those who could consider a child with complex needs, there was an increase in the number of children placed with Voluntary Agencies and other local authorities, as the adoption team remain committed to placing children with their new families at the earliest opportunity.

Number of Children Placed for Adoption Awaiting Adoption Orders

There were 35 children placed for adoption and awaiting an adoption order as at 31st March 2017.

The majority of prospective adopters continue to make their application to adopt following the 10 week review in order to progress their adoption at the earliest opportunity. It is expected that a significant proportion of these children will have their Adoption Orders granted by 31st March 2018.

6. Adoption Orders

Table 7: No. of Adoption Orders granted

DCC	43
VAA	1
OLA	7
DCC-FC	0
Total	51
2015/16	28
2014/15	43

Fifty one adoption orders were granted during the period of 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017. This was a significant increase on the previous year, 28, and more than 14/15 when 43 children were adopted.

The number of birth parents who contest the Placement Order, or oppose the granting of the Adoption Order at the Initial Birth Parent Hearing has increased and is now the norm. In the majority of cases, their application or appeal has eventually not been granted, but this has continued to cause hearings to be adjourned until a later date causing delay in the granting of the Adoption Order. This creates anxiety for adopters who require and receive support from their adoption worker at this time, and extends the duration of time that the children remain Looked After.

Table 8: Pre-Adoption Order Disruption

DCC	1
VAA	0
OLA	0
DCC-FC	0
Total	1
2015/16	1

One child who had been placed for adoption by Durham County Council was sadly returned to the care of the Local Authority following an Adoption Disruption.

Table 9: Non agency adoptions (step parent adoptions)

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
2016/17	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
2015/16	0	0	3	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	8

Although there continues to be a high level of applications for assessment for non-agency adoptions these appear to be more and more complex with the majority of enquiries not progressing to full assessment following initial visit.

Post Adoption Support

It is acknowledged that children placed for adoption and their families often require additional support over the period of their childhood. Durham has the provision of support due to The Full Circle Therapeutic Service, which provides bespoke therapeutic interventions in a timely manner. No other local authorities have this service and it is a strong element in our recruitment and support offer.

Adoption support systems and processes have been reviewed and re-designed to provide a more effective, efficient and responsive service for all affected by adoption which underpins the implementation of Durham Adoption Support Passport. Adopters and their families are informed at the time of the match that they have a right to request an assessment of their adoption support needs throughout the life time journey of their adoption experiences until the child reaches the age of majority at 18.

Adoption support needs are evaluated during assessment, match and placement in order to achieve positive outcomes and where required additional support from a wide range of services is available:

- Dedicated Looked After Nurses, Life Story Co-ordinator, Full Circle Therapeutic Service and Medical Adviser all contribute to provide excellent support to adopters and professionals in addressing any health issues.
- Informal “buddy” support from approved adopters for newly approved adopters and those who need “friendly” support and advice.
- The Virtual School Service offers a wide range of support, advice and guidance to adopters and professionals with regard to educational issues. Use of Pupil Premium Plus continues to be promoted.
- Out of hours support is available for adopters through the Durham County Council Emergency Duty Team (EDT) when required.
- The dedicated Consultant Clinical Child Psychologist provided 74 consultations to adopters during the period April 15 to end March 16. This consultation and support to adopters helped them to understand the impact of trauma and neglect

upon children's behaviour and relationships as well as thinking about the children and young people's developmental, emotional and mental health issues and concerns and promoted placement stability. This is especially important during matching.

- The Adoption Support Fund has been available to access funds for therapeutic support for adopted children and their families. For the period in question Full Circle has claimed £101,137.01 (32 children/families) with a further £20,392.50 being claimed following assessment of children's post adoption support needs from outside therapeutic organisation/ training (8 children/families). Total £121,529.51. (2015/16 £145,122.27). The reduction is due largely to unexpected changes by Government to funding available and the 'fair access' limit introduced by Government in December 2016 to manage the high number and costs of applications across the country.
- Attachment Training is delivered by The Full Circle Team and receives excellent feedback from adopters and is invaluable to assist them in their understanding of the needs of children and some of the challenges their behaviour may bring ensuring that adopters offer suitable therapeutic parenting to children from the outset. All adopters are offered the opportunity to attend the attachment course either prior to or following placement.

Additional Adoption Support Events

- Two family fun day events are organised each year by the Adoption Service in July and December. These are well attended and received, and give adopted children and their parents the opportunity to meet with other children and families.
- The service level agreement for providing post adoption support to birth parents, adoptive families, their children and young people was changed to After Adoption in April 2017 following a competitive process. Early indications are that After Adoption has a better understanding of the tasks involved in supporting adoptive families which will ultimately lead to a better service provided
- Family and Friends of Adoption events take place 6 times a year and are facilitated by Life Story Co-ordinator. These events are well received by the friends and families of prospective adopters and the feedback received is excellent.

A wide range of adoption support services with multi team/agency input is provided and these include regular training events, seminars, social events, drop in sessions, and individual casework.

Birth Records Counselling

When a child reaches the age of 18 they can apply to view their birth records and make an application to Durham County Council and are supported to do so. Records are sought and the adopted person is supported to view them either by an experienced member of the team or After Adoption. Last year 8 people received birth records counselling.

Enquiries Access to Adoption Information by Adopted Adults

There was an increase to 41 from 28 in the previous year of enquiries for adopted adults.

Referrals to Parents & Children (PAC) UK

There were 24 referrals to PAC (UK) mainly from contemporary birth parents last year.

Request for an Assessment of Post-Adoption Support Needs

Twenty four requests were received for post adoption support.

Number of referrals to Adoption Support Fund

There were 46 referrals to the Adoption Support Fund.

New Adoption Allowance Agreed

The number of children receiving adoption financial support and allowance remains high. At w/c 26th March 2017 112 children's families were in receipt of an adoption allowance at a weekly cost £13,483.55. Twenty three new allowances were agreed last year.

Contact Plans and 'The Post Box' Service

Four hundred and ninety nine adoptive families, 292 birth mothers, 210 birth fathers, 103 Birth Maternal Grandparents, 47 paternal grandparents and 39 significant others are logged for the exchange of indirect contact annually making a total of 1190 separate indirect contact episodes. This increases with every child matched.

The Adoption Service operates an efficient and proactive Post Box system. This promotes the exchange of information in accordance with contact plans and agreements to assist the child and birth parents through varying stages of development. There are robust mechanisms to monitor and control information exchanged to safeguard the child and placement. The Adoption Service scan and retain information exchanged between adopters, adopted children and birth family members to have a backup of the information received in the event of this being required.

The provision of adoption support in maintaining indirect contact plans between adopters, adopted children and birth family members has increased in the last 5 years and can be complex and resource intensive. This reflects the increase in the number of children placed.

The opportunities presented by social networking sites such as Facebook also present considerable challenges in adoption placements as this has become a mechanism for informal tracing or unsolicited child/parent contact occurring. This continues to cause significant distress to adopters and the dangers of this are highlighted within the ICP training.

Life Story Work Consultations

Table 16: Number of Consultations

Year	Social Workers	Social Work Assistant	Residential Workers	Foster Carers	Adopters	Others	Total
2016/17	19	11	0	26	67	15	138
2015/16	23	7	0	23	56	2	111
2014/15	22	17	8	23	29	4	103
2013/14	85	43	22	34	58	19	261

Training and consultation has continued to be the main focus of the life story work and there are ongoing developments in both these areas including an opportunity to have the voice of the child present on the Family and Friends workshop and also the Adoption Preparation and Counselling course. This has included the production of a piece of film work with an adopted child in Durham and also the ability to access and use a film which includes the voice of teens and their views and experiences of adoption that the life story co-ordinator was involved with in Leeds .

Recent developments have also included the setting up of a supported peer group for adopters. The Adopters Voice is in its early stages, however we had a positive first meeting mid-March and are planning for an innovative and creative future which will include, self-care elements as well as learning and sharing.

Application for Investing in Children status has been submitted and the evidence that has been provided includes the film of our young person talking about adoption and their experiences, discussion with a birth child regarding their involvement during their families preparation to adopt and the update of the Children's Guide to Adoption. We are also planning to include the voice of the child, wherever possible, to the Adoption Facebook page.

Another area of growth and development within life story work has been the regular and consistent consideration to provide Life Appreciation days for children in Durham with older children, children in sibling groups, children with complex needs and children placed outside Durham. In the last year we have hosted 6 which has also provided an opportunity to work more closely with birth family which been a positive experience for these children and will support the information held in their life story.

Feedback from Adopters

The Adoption team has received positive feedback at all stages of the adoption process (available on request). Quotes from adopters have been added to the advertising campaigns where permission has been given.

KEY PRIORITIES FOR 2017/18

The Adoption Service “Statement of Purpose” sets out the aims and objectives of the team.

The main priorities of The Adoption Service will continue to focus on Recruitment and Assessment, Family Finding and Adoption Support.

- Recruitment and Assessment of adopters will be prioritised and targeted in order that in-house resources are available locally and within the region for children who need adoption placements. This will be directly linked to the needs of children with a plan of adoption.
- Fostering to Adopt to become more embedded in the information and assessment processes and to raise awareness of this within early care planning to ensure early permanence is achieved wherever possible.
- Family Finding will be proactive in order to provide placement choice and to avoid unnecessary delays in placing children in new families. Following a plan of Adoption being approved by the Agency Decision Maker a family finder is allocated so their needs can be considered and they can be featured appropriately. This will continue to allow every child with a plan of adoption to have the greatest opportunity to be matched with an adoptive family who can meet their needs throughout their lives as soon as possible.
- Timely, efficient and high quality support to be provided, utilising The Adoption Support Fund to ensure that placement stability is maximised.
- The priority of the Adoption Service is to make and sustain stable adoption placements and to ensure that the lifelong needs of those affected by adoption are met.
- To contribute to and support the plan to regionalise adoption services in order to consolidate resources and reduce delay for children with a plan of adoption. This will present both opportunities and challenges for the Adoption Service in the future.

Chris Bell
Operations Manager
Fostering, Adoption and Full Circle