



Durham County Council

Adoption Service

Annual Report of the Adoption Service and Adoption Panel Report

1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018



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1. 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 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018 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

2. 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, responsive 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.

3. Regionalisation of Adoption Services

The Regionalisation of adoption services became a statutory requirement in 2020 and is intended to develop joint services with a clear sense of responsibility and accountability for recruiting more adopters, to speed up the matching of children, thereby reducing the amount of time children wait for families and to provide a consistent good quality range of post adoption services.

The DFE have approved the proposal for Durham County Council Adoption Service, Cumbria County Council Adoption Service and Sunderland, now 'Together for Children' registered as a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA), along with the 4 existing voluntary agencies of After Adoption, Barnardos, ARC and DFW Adoption to establish the RAA to be known as Coast to Coast. This will be a new organization providing all adoption services.

A Project Manager has recently been appointed to progress this Coast to Coast Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

A governance Board is now established to work through the Project to establish the new organization by Autumn 2019.

4. Fostering For Adoption

The focus of this approach is to reduce placement moves for children, primarily small babies and infants to be placed with adopters who are also approved as foster carers prior to the granting of a Placement Order. These carers need to be 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. 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 (F2A) is a key strategic priority and key area of improvement for the adoption service and the wider CYPS teams including the Pre Birth Team and this practice will continue to be embedded into the service. Fostering for Adoption continues to be discussed with all prospective adopters during training and assessment. There has been little interest in this form of adoption historically, prospective adopters often feel 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.

F2A is a key component of the Early Permanence strategy to reduce placement moves for children and is to be considered by the child's social workers at the earliest opportunity.

The adoption service have placed 3 children under F2A arrangements during 2017 – 2018 and these have been extremely successful.

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.

5. Roles and Responsibilities within CYPs

- The Heads of Service during 2017 – 18 were Carole Payne & Helen Fergusson.
- Karen Robb, Strategic Manager for Looked After Children and Permanence Services continued to serve as the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for adoption.
- Mark Gurney, Strategic Manager for Child Protection and Disability, served as ADM in the absence of Karen Robb.
- In March 2017 Chris Bell was appointed as Operations Manager for Fostering, Adoption and Full Circle.

6. Structure of the Adoption Service

The service consists of:

One Team Manager, three Senior Practitioners, three F/T Social Workers and three P/T Social Workers. The service is supported by two business support staff, one of which is the Adoption Panel Administrator.

The team has three key lead areas:

Family Finding for Children

Recruitment and Assessment of adoption and F2A carers

Post Adoption Support of Services

A review of the team structure will take place June/July 2018.

7. Adoption Service and Adoption Panels' Activities and Achievements

- There were 19 Adoption Panel meetings during the period 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018.
- Stella Chambers continued to serve as Adoption Panel Administrator, until December 2017 when she took early retirement. Dianne Main commenced in post in March 2018.
- The Adoption Panels' Independent Chairs are Mary Greenwood and Barbara Brelsford. They are suitably experienced to chair the panels and also the Agency Medical Advisor, Elected Members and Independent Panel Members demonstrate continued contribution to the training and preparation courses for prospective adopters.
- Annual Adoption Panel Training took place in 2017. This was joint training with Panel Members, the Adoption Service and LAC Permanence Team in attendance.

- The Adoption Service reviewed its targeted Recruitment and Marketing Strategy for 2015-2018 to focus on the need to recruit sufficient adopters to meet need and to focus on F2A covers. This is significantly important with the increase in numbers of looked after children and the large number of children under the age of 5.
- Durham County Council continues to provide high quality post adoption support services to adopters and adopted children. This includes Full Circle and the therapeutic input from Dr Joyce Powell, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, and other members of the Full Circle Therapeutic Team. They contribute to adoption training and will offer consultations and advise to all adopters on every child prior to matching panel at both linking and matching. This is a recognised area of best practice.
- The adoption service continues to work in an integrated manner with the LAC and Permanence Team. This is an area of strength in the service ensuring best practice in adoption for children and their new families.

Table 1: Initial Enquiry

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Initial Contact	11	7	10	17	13	17	16	12	12	15	16	11	104 (175)
Attendees at Information Events	3	2	3	6	4	6	2	4	5	2	7	5	30 (48)
Number of Enquiry Forms	7	3	6	6	8	7	8	5	8	10	5	5	51 (88)
Initial Visits	6	4	2	1	1	7	4	4	0	3	5	3	40 (28)
ROI Accepted	2	3	2	6	1	1	2	2	1	3	1	4	28 (29)
Training	0	0	0	8	0	3	0	6	0	6	0	1	24 (28)

**Previous year figures (2016 – 17) in brackets.*

The table demonstrates a consistent number of enquiries and an increase in the number of initial visits undertaken. The period when compared with the previous 12 months of enquiry forms, initial visits and ROI's accepted, with only 28 people attending training and assessments. We changed the team structure in order to provide a better service experience (i.e. not asking too many questions by phone prior to a visit). However whilst this may have increased service user experience this has not led to an increase in ROI's being accepted.

There has been a steady interest in adoption over the last 12 months. The targeted Recruitment and Marketing Strategy has continued but has not achieved an increased 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 Bishop Auckland Food Festival, Sedgefield Show and Durham Pride Event where the Adoption Service was promoted and staff were in attendance to give information and advice for people who may have an interest in adopting.

The Adoption Leadership Board confirms that 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. This has resulted in fewer suitable families when utilising the additional national resources on Linkmaker and/or the Adoption Register.

The Local Authority's recruitment strategy for adopters is now based on an analysis of annual adoptive parent data so recruitment is more targeted. This includes, age, profession, income, types of children placed, numbers of children placed, postcode areas.

The service attracts a large number of enquiries. All prospective adopters who apply to the service are well 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 as part of the developing RAA the preparation training is being done jointly with Together for Children (formerly Sunderland Adoption Service). Adopters confirm that they are positive about the communication they had received following their initial enquiry, subsequent assessment visits, and training and support from the service and this remains a priority.

A) Prospective Adopter Assessments:

Durham County Council's Adoption Service aimed to recruit and approve sufficient families of prospective adopters during 2017/2018 to meet the needs of Durham children with a plan of adoption/ a total of 24 adoptive families were approved in the 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. In addition, the majority wished to adopt a child without complex needs in order to become parents.

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 2018 - 2019.

Table 2: Number of Prospective Adopters Approved

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Approvals	2	1	2	1	5	0	1	4	2	1	3	3	24
0-1 month	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
1-3 month	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3-6 month	1	1	1	0	4	0	1	2	1	1	1	3	16
6-12 month	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	6
12 months +	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
2016/17	0	4	2	4	5	1	4	4	3	3	4	1	35

This Table shows the length of time between the Registration of Interest received and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) approval of prospective adopters as suitable to adopt. This demonstrates that the majority of adopter assessments took 3-6 months which is within the government requirement. Where timescales have extended this has been 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 (OBS) delays.

B) 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 with Durham Children.

C) 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
2017/18	2	6	1	8	6	8	4	5	7	4	5	5	61
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

The number of looked after children in Durham approved for adoption has remained relatively high this year. This is reflective of the increase in the total number of looked after children during this period.

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
2017/18	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	3	7

In the year 2017/2018 the ADM has agreed to change the plan from adoption for 7 children to permanence through foster care. This has been due to the children's complex needs, some of which were not apparent at the point of the original decision and also the Court has not agreed a Placement Order but a care order with a plan of permanence in foster care.

D) Children Placed for Adoption

Table 5: Number of Children Placed for Adoption April 2017 – March 2018

	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- Foster Carer Adoption	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Voluntary Adoption	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5
Other Local Authorities	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
2016/17													

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

The Number of children placed for adoption in 2017/2018 was 43. This has remained at a similar level to the previous year .

The adoption service has increased its use of VAA placements primarily as a result of the lack of available adopters within Durham, particularly those who could consider a child with complex needs. The adoption service remain committed to placing children with their new families at the earliest service opportunity rather than to wait for an in house placement if non are available.

E) Number of Children Placed for Adoption Awaiting Adoption Orders

There are 32 children in total who are currently placed for adoption and awaiting an adoption order.

F) Children who are waiting subject to Placement Order and how long they have waited (those 6 months plus).

There were 16 children who had a Placement Order and were waiting for a match with adopters at the end of 2017/2018. 7 of these children's plans are to change and reports are due to go to ADM in respect of these and these children will be found foster carers to care for them permanently. A further 4 had links and were due to go to matching panel and the remaining 5 children have links which were actively being explored.

G) Non agency adoptions (step parent adoptions)

These are completed by a single dedicated member of the team. During 2017-18 twelve applications were accepted, out of these, 8 are no longer progressing due to changes within the families concerned ,2 applicants have fallen pregnant meaning their assessment is currently on hold.

H) Interagency Placements:

Table 7: Number of Interagency Placements

An Interagency Placement is where adopters are approved for another Local Authority of Voluntary Adoption Agency.

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
2017/18	2	1	1	0	4	0	2	3	0	1	1	0	15

Number	Interagency/Agency
2	After Adoption
1	Northumberland
1	South Tyneside
2	Middleborough
2	Hull

Out of 42 looked after children placed for adoption in the year 2017/2018 15 were placements were inter-agency. This is a relatively high number and is reflective of the fact that number of adopters recruited by the local authority has continued to be relatively low. On one occasion the interagency placement was due to a sibling already having been adopted.

I) Foster to Adopt

There have been 3 foster to adopt placements in the year 2017/2018. These have all been successful for the children. This is an area of high strategic priority for 2018 – 2019 and future years as part of the Early Permanence Strategy to reduce delay and drift in childrens carers.

8. 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 from The Full Circle Therapeutic Service, which provides bespoke

therapeutic interventions to children and their families. This service and it is a strong element in our recruitment and support offer to prospective adopters and is highly commended by them. .

Adoption support systems and processes have been reviewed and re-designed to provide a more effective, efficient and responsive service for all those affected by adoption. This 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 their child reaches the age of majority at 18.

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

- Dedicated Looked After / Adoption 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.
- A dedicated Consultant Clinical Child Psychologist from The Full Circle provided 42 consultations to adopters during April 17-March 18. This consultation and support to adopters helps 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 2017 – 18 support for adopted children and their families. For the period Full Circle has claimed £98,776.38 (32 children/families) with a further £31,825.96 being claimed following assessment of children’s post adoption support needs from outside therapeutic organisation. This is required when children are placed outside of the NE Region.

9. 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. Feedback from the events is very positive.
- The Service Level Agreement for providing post adoption support to birth parents, adoptive families, their children and young people is provided by After

Adoption since 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 an improved offer.

- 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 positive.

10. Family Finding for children with Care Plan of Adoption

The reduction of approved adopters both nationally and within Durham has increased the tasks of Family Finding on a more National basis. This has resulted in a higher number of children being Out of County.

It has been possible to link harder to place children in a timely manner due to two focused workers in this area.

This has also been assisted by working in Partnership with our Regional Coast to Coast partners in both the voluntarily and Local authority. Further our Family Finding events with the Coast to Coast Alliance are planned in 2018/2019.

The improvement in timeliness for identifying placements for all children and those harder to place children has been commented upon positively by the Looked After Children Permanence Team with whom we work in close partnership.

11. 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 a total of 23 people received birth records counselling.

12. Adoption Support Statistics April 17-March 18:

27 Enquiries for Access to Adoption Information by Adopted Adults

24 Referrals to Parents & Children (PAC) UK-After Adoption.

62 Requests for an Assessment of Post-Adoption Support Needs

18 requests were received for post adoption support via Full Circle.

62 referrals to Adoption Support Fund

The number of children receiving adoption financial support and allowance remains high. At the end of March 2018 112 children's families were in receipt of an adoption allowance. Twenty three new allowances were agreed in 2017-18.

13. Contact Plans and 'The Post Box' Service

A total of 588 adoptive families, birth mothers, birth fathers, birth maternal grandparents, paternal grandparents and significant others receive the exchange of

indirect contact annually making a total of 1,500 separate indirect contact episodes. This increases with every child matched.

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 for adoption.

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 preparation to adopt training and post adoption support training.

14. Life Story Work

Training and consultation has continued to be the main focus of Life Story Work and there are ongoing developments in both these areas including the voice of the child preparation Training and Fostering This has included the production of a piece of film work with an adopted child in Durham.

Recent developments have also included the setting up of a supported peer group for adopters. The Adopters Voice is in its early stages of development.

Application for Investing in Children status for the Adoption Service has been submitted and the evidence that has been provided includes the film of young people 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 to the Adoption Service Facebook page.

Further development within life story work has been the regular and consistent Life Appreciation Days for children being placed for adoption. This is especially important for older children and sibling group placements. During 2017 – 18 the adoption service have hosted 6 which has provided an opportunity to work more closely with birth family members which been a positive experience for children and will support the information held in their life story into later life. It has also enabled positive relationships between birth family members and adoptive families to develop.

15. Key Priorities 2018/19

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:

- To work toward the development of and 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. Regionalised Adoption Service, the Coast 2 Coast Alliance. This will be fully operational by Autumn 2019.

- Recruitment and Assessment of adopters will be prioritized 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 continue to be proactive and provided by 3 dedicated workers to provide placement choice and avoid unnecessary delays in placing children in new families. This ensures 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 post adoption 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.