

SUPPORTIVE PARENTING PARTNERSHIP

AGENDA

Meeting to be held on Monday 8 July 2024 at 5.30pm in the Conference Room, Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland, SR3 4EN

Part I

ITEM		PAGE
1.	Apologies for Absence	
2.	Declarations of Interest	
3.	Minutes	1
	Minutes of Meeting held on 15 April 2024 (copy attached).	
4.	Health of Cared for Children	
	Report of the Designated Nurse for Cared for Children (report to follow).	
5.	Children and Young Peoples Service Cared for Pathway	7
	Report of the Clinical Manager, Sunderland CYPS (copy attached).	
6.	Regulation 44 Visitors Annual Overview	9
	Report attached.	
7.	Adoption Sunderland Annual Report 2023/2024	27
	Report attached.	

For further information and assistance, please contact
Gillian Kelly, Democratic Services Team Leader
gillian.kelly@sunderland.gov.uk

8. **Work Programme**

43

Report attached.

ELAINE WAUGH
Assistant Director of Law and Governance

City Hall
SUNDERLAND

28 June 2024

SUPPORTIVE PARENTING PARTNERSHIP

**Minutes of the Meeting held on Monday 15 April 2024 at 5.00pm in the
Conference Room, Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland, SR3 4EN**

Present:

Members of the Board

Councillor Linda Williams (Chair)	Cabinet Member, Children, Learning and Skills
Councillor Margaret Crosby	Sandhill Ward
Councillor Pat Smith	Silksworth Ward
Councillor Phil Tye	Silksworth Ward

All Supporting Officers

Jill Colbert	Chief Executive, Together for Children
Kathyn McCabe	Head of Service, Cared for Children and Provider Services
Kevin Brown	Strategic Programme Manager, TfC
Kim Richardson	Strategic Education Lead
Anita Swales	Headteacher, Virtual School
Alex Bowey	Participation and Engagement Manager
Caitlin	Change Council
Chantelle	Change Council
Gillian Kelly	Democratic Services

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Helen Monks and Jo McCarthy.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

23. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2024 be agreed as a correct record.

Change Council Update

The Change Council report had been submitted to the Partnership and was presented to Members by Chantelle and Caitlin.

The Change Council now had three groups; 16+, 12 – 15 and the Change Council Mini which was for young people aged 7 – 11.

The 12-15 Change Council continued to move forward regarding the production of short films to raise awareness and challenge the stigma in education for cared for young people. Alex Bowey had met with Blue Cabin to discuss the project and they had quoted £10,000 for the work so a focus would be identifying the funds.

Subject to understanding the project specification from Blue Cabin, Anita Swales commented that the Virtual School may be able to offer some support. Alex highlighted that Blue Cabin did have some funding options but needed to know what this could be matched against. Councillor Tye suggested that Community Chest funding was also an option, or the VCS Alliance.

The Change Game workshop had been delivered at a Sunderland University staff event and also at the Regional Children in Care Council at their Let's Talk Change event in November. This was also being delivered for student teachers and there were two sessions arranged for Together for Children staff.

Two members of the Change Council had taken part in the Let's Talk Change event and it was highlighted that all professionals there had made a 'Pinky Promise' of something which they were going to do between the event and the main conference in April.

The 12-15 group had been looking at the creation of some easy guides around different aspects of being cared for and care experienced and had also been working on a proposal to increase the toiletry allowance in line with the cost of living.

Councillor Crosby asked how long the toiletry budget had been set at £10 a month and Jill Colbert said that some allowances were nationally advised and a review had been undertaken some time ago and Sunderland had come out quite well against other authorities. Kathryn McCabe added that there were some wider conversations taking place in homes in relation to pocket money.

Change Council 16+ had been involved in recruitment and selection for social workers, the Next Steps deputy head of service and children's home management teams. Efforts were made to involve as many young people as possible in recruitment processes.

Kathryn noted that there had been some discussions about how the processes worked and feedback was being gathered from HR. It could be very difficult to get times of day which worked for all involved and this was being picked up. Jill advised that a broader piece of work was being undertaken on the voice of children and young people and how they could have more involvement in issues which affected them.

The Chair asked if the young people involved in recruitment received the same information as everyone else and Chantelle confirmed that they would write their own interview questions, score the candidates and hand this in at the end of the process.

£500 had been awarded from the Key Fund to support Children's Home Fortnight and it was hoped to hold this event annually.

Change the Language was being expanded alongside Cozmic 3piphany and STARS to extend the campaign to cover SEND and LGBTQ+.

As mentioned earlier in the report, the Change Council Mini was up and running but there were only a small number of members. The Chair queried how the young people might be supported to engage with this and Anita Swales noted that there were some Virtual School pupils who were on school councils and she could ask the primary leads to promote the Change Council to these young people.

The Change Council had supported the planning for the Cared for Christmas Party and representatives had taken part in the Healthier Together consultation for a new NHS app for young people.

The North East Regional Children in Care Council had been nominated for a Coram Voice Amplify Collaboration Award and two Change Council members had represented Sunderland at the award ceremony in London.

Staff and young people were involved in the social media takeover to raise awareness of Care Day and representatives from all of the region's Children in Care Councils attended the regional Let's Talk Change Conference.

The planned work for the Spring/Summer was as follows: -

- Change Market event for National Care Experienced History Month April – Key Fund to apply for
- Change Game sessions – welcome to attend
- Invite Supportive Parenting Partnership to attend some sessions and meet other young people.
- Regional Let's Talk Change Conference 2024
- Children's Home Fortnight May – Key Fund to apply for and hopefully TfC match
- Continue to consult and involve more cared for and care experienced children and young people.
- Alex was to regularly drop in to Children's Homes and Support 2 Independence.
- Graffiti artwork
- Regional representatives to present at the Corporate Parenting Panel Chairs/Vice-Chairs conference

The Chair thanked Chantelle and Caitlin for presenting the report and accordingly it was: -

24. RESOLVED that the Change Council update be noted.

Virtual School Annual Report 2022/2023

The Headteacher submitted the annual report of the Virtual School.

Anita Swales introduced the report and in doing so highlighted that the remit of the Virtual School had changed over the last three years to include the additional strategic

responsibility to 'Promote the Education of Children with a Social Worker' and would expand further in September 2024 to include children and young people in kinship care.

The vast majority of children within the remit of the Virtual School had experienced significant barriers to education as a result of adverse childhood experiences, trauma, most commonly abuse and neglect, and often had attachment disorders.

The Virtual School had been restructured in May 2022 to provide capacity to carry out additional and extended duties and Anita highlighted that each caseworker would look after approximately 60 children and young people. The Governing Board of the school met three times a year to support and challenge on areas of the school development plan.

A summary of the support provided to children and young people, colleagues and carers was included in the report and it was noted that this was constantly developing. This year, a grant of £1,000 had been disseminated to each school to raise awareness of adverse childhood experiences and with the extension of duties the Virtual School was trying to raise awareness and advocate for children with a social worker.

The Chair commented that relationships were very key and there could be some tension here, especially with the remit getting wider and wider. She was pleased to hear that the Governing Board did challenge the data and Jill added that the information went to the Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis.

Overall, there had been a total of 577 children and young people in the care of the Virtual School for some or all of the academic year 2022/2023 and the reportable cohort was 375, 41.6% of which was female and 58.4% male. 52% of the cohort either had an EHCP or were identified on the Special Educational Needs Register.

84% of the Virtual School cohort were in Good or Outstanding schools and compliance with Personal Educational Plans (PEPs) was above 97%. A total of 1,447 had been completed in the academic year and 94% were quality assured as good.

A new system had been introduced which had enabled an improved range of data requested including:

- Emotional health and wellbeing
- Progress since the last PEP
- Attitude to learning
- Conduct and engagement.

The data had been quite positive in terms of how young people were presenting; attitude to learning and overall progress was generally good.

In terms of attendance, the overall figure was above the national average for cared for children and Sunderland children had lower rates of suspension than the same regional and national cohorts, although the total numbers had risen. The Virtual School provided a considerable amount of support to avoid suspension and exclusions.

Outcomes in early years and for phonics in year 1 were good but results at the end of Key Stage 1 were down. Anita advised that staff had been recruited for early year tuition but also noted that these children had been 'Covid' babies and that mitigation was important.

Results at Key Stage 2 were similar to the national average and were quite positive at Key Stage 4.

Councillor Tye noted that 31.9% of children were taught outside of Sunderland and queried if there was data available for the Ofsted rating of those schools. Kim Richardson confirmed that it could be provided. He also asked whether the 0.8% of children in an inadequate rated school were outside of Sunderland and Anita explained that this represented two children in a specific school in the city.

Councillor went on to refer to suspensions which seemed to be increasing in all schools and Anita commented that this was a similar picture nationally, particularly as a result of persistent disruptive behaviour. The Virtual School was not complacent but would challenge where suspensions were given.

Anita advised that there had been a new structure for post-16 pathways since 2022 and the Transition Mentor focused on Year 11 pathway plans, particularly for those at risk of not accessing education, employment or training. This approach had paid dividends and at the end of the academic year, the number of 16–17-year-olds in education, employment or training was 80% of the cohort.

The Chair thanked Anita for the detailed report and accordingly it was: -

25. RESOLVED that the Virtual School Annual Report 2022/2023 be noted.

The DfE Reform Programme and Current and Future TfC Transformative Work

Kevin Brown, Strategic Programme Manager, delivered a presentation to the Partnership and in doing so detailed the recent publications which had provided a catalyst and vision to transform children's social care. In February 2023, the DfE published 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' strategy and consultation which included a £45m commitment to establish the Families First for Children (FFCP) pathfinder programme which would design and test major reforms to children's services.

There would be four key reform strands to this pathfinder: -

- Overarching system reform and multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (MASA)
- Family help
- Family networks
- Child protection.

Together for Children was involved in this transformative activity through programmes such as the Family Network pilot, Family Hubs, My Best Life and foster care recruitment and retention through 'Foster with the North East'.

Jill Colbert referred to the My Best Life single online location for families to access high quality up to date information, advice and guidance and noted that TfC had worked with the digital provider of Mind of My Own and had been able to develop My Best Life for a fraction of the price.

She highlighted that Family Hubs were designed to help to reach families before social care involvement and Kathryn McCabe added that the hubs were also being used to engage kinship carers.

Councillor Tye noted that Together for Children had already been on that transformation journey with early help and children's centres and the DfE was being slightly misleading to suggest that all of this work was new.

Jill advised Members that if the proposed reforms to the child protection system were to go ahead, then these would require significant changes to primary legislation. The current Government remained highly committed to these reforms. She agreed that what was being asked for nationally, was already happening locally. There were some good, small projects being developed and it was intended to bring relevant updates through to Members where possible.

26. RESOLVED that the presentation be noted.

Work Programme 2024/2025

The Board were informed of the work programme for the municipal year 2024/2025 and forthcoming agenda items.

27. RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

Councillor Pat Smith

Prior to the close of the meeting, the Chair paid tribute to Councillor Pat Smith who was stepping down from the Council at the local elections in May. She thanked Councillor Smith for being a fabulous advocate for children and young people during her 25 years as a councillor and expressed her appreciation for the time and commitment which Councillor Smith had given to improving the lives of children and young people in Sunderland.

(Signed) L WILLIAMS
Chair

Topic: Sunderland Children and Young Peoples Service Cared for pathway
Referrals received from January – June 2024 and outcomes.

Month	Total received	Not accepted	Reason for those not accepted	Other	Total accepted for CFC
January 2024	12	5	2 remain in other area of the service. 2 required further information. 1 is due to living arrangements / open care proceedings		7
February 2024	13	1	Open care proceedings		12
March 2024	8	2	further information required re clinical presentation in both cases		6
April 2024	7	1	further information required re social care plan/ clinical needs		6
May 2024	13	1	further information required re social care plan/clinical needs		12

Report for Supportive Parenting Partnership

June 2024	6	2	1 due to care proceedings where support can be sought through Louise Harrison 1 referral was not a Cared For child.		4
What is working well?		What are we worried about?		What needs to happen?	
<p>The current caseload size for the CFC pathway is 60 (3 of which are cared for children seen outside of the CFC pathway).</p> <p>The current wait for first appointment is within four weeks. Information gathering, signposting/advice for social workers and or foster carers.</p> <p>The current wait for specialist treatment is four months from receipt of referral – significantly lower than the general CYPS population.</p> <p>.</p>					
<p>What is required from Supportive Parenting Partnership: Nothing at current time</p>					
<p>Report written by: Samantha Diston, Community Clinical Manager</p> <p>Service/ Team area: Sunderland CYPS</p> <p>Date: 26.06.24</p>					

together for
children
SUNDERLAND



Regulation 44 Visitor's Annual Overview

April 23 – March 24

putting
the child first

Contents

1	Purpose of the report	3
2	Role of the Regulation 44 Visitor.....	3
3	Summary and Headlines	3
4	Regulation 44 Visitor Findings	6
4.1	<i>Claremont House.....</i>	6
4.2	<i>Colombo Road.....</i>	8
4.3	<i>Grasswell House.....</i>	9
4.4	<i>Maple Cottage</i>	11
4.5	<i>Monument View.....</i>	13
4.6	<i>Nook Lodge</i>	14
4.7	<i>Revelstoke Road</i>	16

1 Purpose of the report

To provide elective members of the Supportive Parenting Partnership with an update on the findings in relation to the regulation 44 visits undertaken to the seven Together for Children residential homes in Sunderland between April 2023 and March 2024.

2 Role of the Regulation 44 Visitor

A Regulation 44 Visitor, also known as an independent visitor, is required to visit and inspect residential children's homes at least once per month, either announced or unannounced. The visits are carried out in accordance with regulation 44 of The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015. The Visitors are independent of the organisations children's social care services and are responsible for making rigorous and impartial assessments of the home's arrangements for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the children in its care. This is achieved by scrutinising all relevant documentation, talking to the children living in the home, their parents or relatives, carers from the home and relevant professionals.

The Regulation 44 Visitor produces a report following every visit which includes recommendations the visitor has identified to improve the care of the children. The report is sent to the manager of the home, the Responsible Individual for Together for Children (TfC) and Ofsted. Positive feedback has been received from Ofsted regarding the quality of the regulation 44 reports.

Within TfC there are two, permanent part-time Regulation 44 visitors and one PVH Visitor, based within the Children's Independent Reviewing Team. All are social work qualified and registered with Social Work England.

3 Summary and Headlines

 <p>Claremont House</p> <p>4 children currently living in home 17 visitor recommendations (all) 11 recommendations last visit 41 missing episodes, 3 over 24 hours 20 Critical Incidents 10 Ofsted Notifications</p>	<p>New edge of care home 22/11/23 <i>Awaiting 1st Ofsted visit</i></p>
 <p>Colombo Road</p> <p>Judged to be 'Outstanding'</p> <p>6 children currently living in home 5 visitor recommendations (all) 1 recommendation last visit 21 missing incidents, 0 over 24 hours 11 Critical Incidents 9 Ofsted Notifications</p>	<p>Ofsted Recommendation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">To ensure that for children's homes to be nurturing and supportive environments that meet the needs of their children, they will, in most cases, be homely, domestic environments. Children's homes must comply with relevant health and safety legislations (alarms, food hygiene etc.); however, in doing so, homes should seek as far as possible to maintain a domestic rather than 'institutional' impression.



Grasswell House

Judged to be 'Good'

5 children currently living in home
 12 visitor recommendations (all)
 2 recommendations last visit
 203 missing incidents, 8 over 24 hours
 33 Critical Incidents
 21 Ofsted Notifications

Ofsted requirements

- Regulation 24 – use of devices for the monitoring or surveillance of children.
- Regulation 6 - ensure that all children are supported to maintain clean and tidy bedrooms in line with the quality and purpose of care standard.

Ofsted recommendation

- Ensure that records are kept up to date. Specifically, behaviour support plans should contain up-to-date information.



Maple Cottage

Judged to be Good

2 children currently living in home
 15 visitor recommendations (all)
 1 recommendation last visit
 4 missing incidents, 0 over 24 hours
 15 Critical Incidents
 1 Ofsted Notification

Ofsted requirement

- Regulation 8 - children make measurable progress towards achieving their educational potential and are helped to do so.

Ofsted recommendations

- Ensure that any consequences used to address poor behaviour are restorative in nature, to help children recognise the impact of their behaviour on themselves, other children, the staff caring for them and the wider community.
- Ensure that staff record information on individual children in a non-stigmatising way that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third-party information.
- Ensure that there are systems in place so that all the staff, including the manager, receive regular supervision.



Monument View

Judged to be 'Good'

6 children currently living in home
 18 visitor recommendations (all)
 5 recommendations last visit
 5 missing incidents, 0 over 24 hours
 7 Critical Incidents
 7 Ofsted Notifications

Ofsted requirements

- Regulation 32 - recruit staff using recruitment procedures that are designed to ensure children's safety.
- Regulation 36 - maintain records for each child which are kept up to date - this particularly relates to children's care plans and direct work completed with the child.

Ofsted recommendation

- Ensure a child's bedroom is not generally entered without their permission, though it may be necessary to establish routines to allow for rooms to be cleaned regularly. Usually, rooms should only be searched if the child has been informed or asked for their permission.



Nook Lodge

Judged to be 'Requires Improvement to be Good'

2 children currently living in home
 26 visitor recommendations (all)
 2 recommendations last visit
 15 missing incidents, 2 over 24 hours
 44 Critical Incidents
 19 Ofsted Notifications

Ofsted requirements

- Regulation 12 - The protection of children standard is that children are protected from harm and enabled to keep themselves safe.
- Regulation 13 - The leadership and management standard is that the registered person enables, inspires and leads a culture in relation to the children's home.
- Regulation 32 - Recruit staff using recruitment procedures that are designed to ensure children's safety.
- Regulation 25 - After consultation with the fire and rescue authority, provide adequate means of escape from the home in the event of fire.

Ofsted recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that, just as in a family home, children are able to access all shared areas of their home. This includes access to food and snacks, unless there are reasons why this would not meet a child's needs.



Revelstoke Road

Judged to be 'Good'

6 children currently living in home
 10 visitor recommendations (all)
 0 recommendations last visit
 97 missing incidents, 1 over 24 hours
 45 Critical Incidents
 30 Ofsted Notifications

Ofsted requirements

- Regulation 12 - The protection of children standard is that children are protected from harm and enabled to keep themselves safe.
- Regulation 24 – Use of devices for the monitoring or surveillance of children.
- Regulation 32 - Recruit staff using recruitment procedures that are designed to ensure children's safety.

- **Ofsted Visits** - Since last April 2023 two new homes have opened, Maple Cottage and Claremont House. Another home is due to open over the coming year. Apart from Claremont House, all homes have been visited by Ofsted during this reporting period.
 - Four (Grasswell House, Monument View, Revelstoke Road, and Maple Cottage) were judged as Good.
 - One (Colombo Road) was judged Outstanding including this time in the area of Help and Protect which had been Good last year. This was Colombo Road's sixth consecutive overall Outstanding judgement.
 - Nook Lodge was judged as Requires Improvement which resulted in a further Assurance Inspection from Ofsted. This outcome of this visit was that Ofsted did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children. This reflects that positive changes have been made.
- **Relationships** - When children move into a home within TfC the vast majority settle in quickly and develop close relationships with their carers which are based on mutual respect. As a result, carers gain the trust of the children which is significant.
- **Missing Episodes** - Grasswell House and Claremont House have high numbers of missing episodes, particularly Grasswell with 203. Despite the high numbers safeguarding the children has been the priority and both RCCW's and the leadership teams have responded appropriately to all missing episodes, formally addressing concerns with the children, and working in partnership with other agencies, (health, YDAP, Dr Christie, police and the Youth Offending Team), to try and disrupt the missing patterns.
- **UASC** - Several of the homes have continued to care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, with Colombo Road carers being particularly skilled at meeting the needs of these children.
- **LGBTQIA+ Community** - Team members are incredibly supportive of those children who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community. Their knowledge, understanding, empathy and guidance is exceptional.
- **Support To Teams** - All homes continue to work closely the Consultant Clinical Psychologist for the Children and Young People Service (CYPS), who provides support and guidance to team members on a regular basis.
- **Views of adults** - The views of parents, professionals and carers have been generally positive, which has reflected the standard of care the children have received.
- **Views of Children** - The regulation 44 visitors continue to try and seek the wishes and feelings of the children however, this is not always possible due to their lack of engagement. Some of the children are of the view that too many people visit their home and ask them questions. The visitors have agreed that they will try and access the children's views via telephone if they choose not to engage on the day. A summary letter will be sent to the children every six months, when the visitor will change, thanking them for their cooperation.
- **Announced Visits** - The regulation 44 visitors have begun to introduce announced visits so that they can speak with the children's homes manager on at least a bi-monthly basis.
- **Audits** - Their annual programme of themed audits continues to be in place; this is to encourage and support the homes to consider how they meet the Children's Homes Regulations.
- **Learning & Feedback** - The regulation 44 visitors have continued to attend quarterly residential management meetings to share learning and to hear feedback regarding their visits.

- **Professional Development** - Training has been undertaken by the visitors to enable their professional development and that they have the necessary expertise and skills to complete their role to a high standard.
- **Reg 45 Reports** - Regulation 45 reports have been received from the children's homes managers within timescales. They are detailed and assist the visitor in completing the regulation 44 report.
- **Recommendations** - The regulation 44 visitors are of the opinion that all managers are receptive of the visitors, their feedback and any recommendations made are swiftly addressed. It is clear to the visitors that all managers are committed to continually improving the service they provide to the children they care for.

4 Regulation 44 Visitor Findings

4.1 Claremont House



Claremont House is managed by Andrea Dowd and opened 22.11.23. It is a large Victorian terraced house, situated just outside of Sunderland City Centre. The home awaits its first Ofsted inspection. It is decorated and furnished to a particularly high standard both internally and externally, with all children having their own bedroom with ensuite bathroom.

The home provides emergency or short-term care for up to four children who are considered to be edge of care. This means their needs cannot be met in a family home, and that they are at risk of being cared for on a longer-term basis. The children can be male or female and are aged between 11 and 17. The maximum length of stay at Claremont House is 12 weeks during which further work is completed by the social work team to determine their longer-term needs.

Since opening, to the end of March 24, seven children have lived at the home, all for varying durations. From January to end of March, two Residential Childcare Workers (RCCW)

were on sick leave. This had an impact on the team, in that other team members agreed to undertake additional sleep-in duties, as did the registered manager.

During the visit in March 2024, the regulation 44 visitor identified some concerns around the matching of the children due to the impact this was having on their safe care. For example, there had been an escalation in drug use, missing episodes, and damage within the home. This resulted in eleven recommendations being made. The registered manager acknowledged some of the concerns identified, and the referral and matching processes have been re-visited with the Service Manager. In addition, two team development sessions about safeguarding were undertaken and attended by all carers.

The lifestyle of the children and their families can mean that they arrive with poor education attendance. Team members promote, encourage and support attendance and engagement in education however, given the short-term nature of the provision, children often leave the home without their education needs being met.

The health requirements of the children are sometimes uncertain when they arrive. As team members get to know and understand the children their needs become clearer. The registered manager has arranged for a social worker from the Youth Drug and Alcohol Project (YDAP) to visit the home and work with the children to address their risky behaviours.

Children come to live in Claremont House at what is usually a very difficult time for them, and it is often their first cared for experience. Consequently, it often takes time for them to settle, engage with and trust their carers. This affects the progress they can make during their stay.

The key strengths of this home are –

- The manager and her team have good networks with relevant services and professionals and adopt a collaborative approach with them.
- The team have ensured that the children’s care plans are progressed in a timely manner.

The areas for focus of this home are -

- For children’s assessments and safety plans to better identify how to manage risky behaviours.
- The referral and matching process to continue to be re-visited so that they meet the needs of the children who are referred to this home.

When asked if a young person enjoyed living at the home, she replied “yes, I love my bedroom, its got all of my things in it” and also referred to having posters on her wall

A social worker feedback, “I have no concerns about the care provided to the young person. He was offered a warm welcome and lots of reassurance. I have been provided with updates, excellent communication, and flexibility for my visits too. He has a link worker and lots of support from all carers too. Lots of support has been offered in terms of his medical appointments, including CYPS and GP. Also, carers are helpfully keeping in touch with his dad”.

A young person’s mother described his carers as “fabulous considering his behaviour particularly towards the end when it escalated”. Communication was always “excellent” with the care team giving her updates when he went missing and then when he returned.

His mother did however express concern that he never had any consequences for negative or risky behaviours. She felt “he controlled his carers” in this respect.

4.2 Colombo Road



Colombo Road Children's Home, which has been managed by Michael More since 2013 is situated on a large housing estate in the Hylton Castle area of Sunderland. It is decorated and furnished to a high standard both internally and externally, and all young people have their own bedroom. They share two bathrooms.

The home provides care for up to six children, male or female, aged between 11 and 17, for the duration of their needs.

The home has a history of Outstanding inspection judgements and following the Ofsted inspection on 19th and 20th March 2024 the home was judged to be Outstanding in all three areas. The area of Help and Protect had moved from Good to Outstanding and this reflected the reduction in the number of times that children had gone missing from the home. Team members are particularly skilled in building relationships with the children so that any issues can be shared. This reduces incidents within the home and those which lead to children going missing.

Over the past twelve months, nine children have lived at the home, with three of those children living there throughout that duration. Several of the children cared for are unaccompanied asylum seekers which increases their vulnerabilities. Team members are exceptionally skilled in meeting the additional needs of these children. They do this by helping them quickly settle into an area and way of living which they are unfamiliar with. They enable friendships to be made with likeminded peers and ensure their religious and dietary preferences are observed, catered for, and recognised throughout the home.

The RCCW's are supported by an experienced and highly skilled registered manager and deputy both of whom are passionate and strong leaders. The children have benefitted from carers who get to know them, understand them, and help them to progress in all areas. One child received the Sunderland Young Achiever of the Year Award, and another will be Head Boy at school in September. These and other achievements no matter how big or small are recognised and celebrated by the whole team which helps the children feel important and valued. They have been rewarded for their achievements and positive behaviours eighty-nine times during the reporting period.

Over the past twelve months only five recommendations have been made by the regulation 44 visitors, none of which related to the protection of the children. This reflects the quality of care which is provided and how safe the children are living in this home. As does the eight compliments the home has received.

The care team understand the importance of education. This filters through to the children who attend and engage in their respective placements. From the moment a child moves in team members work hard to ensure they are either maintained within their education provision or identify a suitable provision which is then swiftly secured. Team members are proactive and will arrange meetings with education when the children are having difficulties within their provision. They then advocate on behalf of the child which results in appropriate adjustments and/or support being put in place for the child. This helps prevent lost learning.

The key strengths of this home are –

- Children are particularly well cared for and appreciated by adults who know them and protect them.
- The manager has high expectations, and his inspirational nature means that team members share this ethos and respond to it positively.

The areas for focus of this home are -

- To help some children maintain their bedrooms to the same high standard as their peers.
- To help children understand the impact of using inappropriate language.

A young person said "I am very happy here. I go to the gym with M and I have been to watch Sunderland FC. S is getting me a bible and finding me a church I can go to. I speak to my family every day which makes me happy. The food is very good, and I like my bedroom".

A young person's social worker said, "I believe that the level of care and support that continues to be offered by team members and accepted by him is meeting his needs successfully. The team and link workers have worked tirelessly to provide him with the support and guidance that he needs to promote all areas of his care, making him feel valued and respected."

A young person's mum said "I am happy with the standard of care provided; he has thrived since he moved in."

4.3 Grasswell House



Grasswell House Children's Home, which has been managed by Barry Hall since 2019 is located within Sunderland West. The home provides care for up to six children, male or female, aged between 11 and 17, for the duration of their needs.

Grasswell House is decorated and furnished to a high standard both internally and externally, with all children having their own bedroom with a newly updated ensuite bathroom. The vast, safe, well-maintained gardens wrap around the home, providing the children ample space to enjoy activities with carers, their peers and/or friends.

During this reviewing period six young people resided at the home for eight of the months and five for the remaining four. The last Ofsted inspection, undertaken on 9th and 10th August 2023, rated the home as Good in all three areas.

The home's mixed workforce is stable, and guided by an established senior team, all of whom are appropriately qualified to manage the team and care for the children. The registered manager recently returned to work following a period of sick leave however, his absence did not impact upon

the running of the home as the deputy manager and senior residential childcare workers oversaw the home exceptionally well. All, of whom, have the skills, knowledge and experience required of a senior team.

Currently there is one RCCW vacancy however, the team has its full complement of Relief Residential Childcare Workers (RRCCW's), therefore the home is adequately supervised. The stability of the workforce has enabled team members to engage in trusting and meaningful relationships with the children and other professionals. The manager and the leadership team work hard to achieve best outcomes for all cared for children, evidenced from feedback received from them, their family and professionals involved with them.

During this reporting period, announced and unannounced visits highlighted few worries and twelve recommendations were made, all of which were responded to appropriately. Despite the many recorded missing from care episodes (203), during this reporting period, safeguarding the children is the team's priority. RCCW's and the leadership team responded appropriately to all missing episodes by formally addressing concerns with the children and working in partnership with other agencies, (health, YDAP, Dr Christie, police and the Youth Offending Team), to try and disrupt the missing patterns, resulting in a more positive outcome, recently.

The physical and emotional well-being of the children, their education and social needs have been consistently met, to a high standard, despite the difficulties carers have experienced in terms of encouraging them to attend their education provision. However, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that support has been consistently provided, by the team and education personnel, to support the children to achieve their best outcomes.

There have been few moves in/out of Grasswell House this reviewing period, therefore the children have predominantly enjoyed a settled period in a stable environment, with familiar and safe adults. All have developed positive relationships with most carers, some of whom refer to a particular RCCW as 'nana', which evidences a nurturing, homely provision. Despite some worries about the missing from care episodes and children not engaging in education as expected, their home life has been positive in many respects.

The strengths of this home are –

- The stable, experienced leadership team have successfully supervised and guided carers to provide a good standard of care to all children, consistently, throughout this recording period.
- The team have developed meaningful relationships with the children, their family and professionals involved, all of whom work together to safeguard the children.

The areas of focus for this home are -

- For all team members to complete their Level 4 apprenticeship in residential childcare.
- Further work, in terms of the teams understanding and development of therapeutic re-parenting, should be progressed, to support the children's emotional well-being.

A young person's nana stated, "She is happy and settled living at this home". and reported that she has a good relationship with the team who provide regular updates about her granddaughter and that she is proud of her granddaughter's achievements.

A young person's Independent Reviewing Officer reported, "I am impressed by the commitment, energy, and attitude of the team. I believe carers provide him with support, advice and make all efforts to continue to find ways to help him take advantage of all opportunities and give him a clear message that they genuinely care about his welfare".

“A young person’s social worker made several positive comments about his progress, relationship with carers and her transition from the home to supported living. The social worker stated, “the relationship has been a strength and positive in her life, she feels safe living at the home, the care team are excellent advocates for her and carers have remained positive in terms of their communication with the social worker, providing regular updates”.

4.4 Maple Cottage



Maple Cottage, which is managed by Mark Cryer, opened on 16.08.23. It is a large detached double fronted house situated in a residential area of South Hylton, with an appearance in keeping with the neighbouring properties.

Internally the condition of the property is very good. It is pleasantly decorated with nice furnishings which creates a homely feel throughout. There is one bathroom for the children to share. Carers have their own shower room. Externally there is a good-sized garden, however this requires work to be undertaken so that the children can enjoy this outdoor space. The

home provides care for up to two children, male or female, aged between 8 to 17 years, for the duration of their needs.

Shortly after opening two boys moved into the home within a couple of weeks of each other and remain there, to date.

The home had its first Ofsted inspection on 31st January and 1st February 2024. It was judged to be Good in all areas with the report recently received. One requirement was made regarding the poor education attendance of one child. Three recommendations were made relating to sanctions not always being restorative in nature, supervision not always taking place, and blaming language found in some of the children’s records. The registered manager has begun to act upon these issues.

Since the home opened seven and a half months ago, fifteen recommendations have been made by the regulation 44 visitors. Some have related to ongoing concerns around the management structure. The registered manager also manages another children’s home within TfC, as does the deputy manager. Vacancies and sickness have resulted in carers, including those who are senior, working across both homes. This has meant the children have not had consistent carers which can affect how these important relationships develop. In addition, the manager has been required to undertake several sleep-in duties due to gaps in the rota which has taken him away from his management duties. For example, supervision has not always taken place as frequently as it should have, as identified by Ofsted during their inspection. It is, however, positive to note that recently improvements have been made with some restructuring undertaken and additional capacity provided.

Some recommendations have related to safeguarding concerns. For example, one of the boys accessing online platforms. The level of his use of electronic devices has also had an impact upon

his behaviour within the home and his education attendance which has declined since his move into the home, also noted by Ofsted. The manager and team members have acknowledged this and dedicated themselves to addressing this issue, with their hard work beginning to pay off. Education attendance has improved and boundaries within the home are being adhered to more successfully. It is important to acknowledge that the other boy's education attendance is 100% and his engagement is fantastic.

When incidents do take place within the home carers use a recognised approach called PACE which stands for playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy. They are highly skilled in doing so and have undoubtedly made the children safer with their interactions. Through this the children also learn that some adults can and do care for them and will not give up on them.

The manager has acknowledged some concerns in the relationship between the boys. He has maintained excellent oversight of all incidents and through this has identified that there has been an episode of bullying. He has responded swiftly and robustly with a plan of action and has sought support from a specialist agency to help the team develop strategies.

The key strengths of this home are –

- The approaches and techniques used by team members helps to de-escalate the children.
- The excellent oversight the manager has of incidents within the home, how he reflects on these, and the action he takes to address them.

The areas for focus of this home are -

- To provide consistent carers for the children and management availability which meets the needs of the children and team members.
- To make improvements to the back garden as this will encourage the children to spend more time outside and away from their electronic devices.

“A young person said “I don’t like living here, I love it! I love my carers and they love me. When I get homework, they help me, and they read to me at bedtime”.

“A young person’s mum said “I have no concerns about his day-to-day care. However, I am worried that he isn’t going to school and that this is partly because he can do what he wants like having free reign of his x-box”.

“A young person’s social worker said “He is doing really well. He has been accepted by CYPS ad we have a draft EHCP with an identified education provision. He is really happy, and his carers are supporting his family time well. There have been no concerns”.

4.5 Monument View



Monument View Children's Home, which has been managed by Paul Rudd since May 2021 is a large purpose-built detached home located near to Shiney Row at Penshaw. It has been constructed in a style that ensures it does not differ significantly from the other houses within the vicinity. It has been designed to offer the children sufficient space both inside and outside to engage in a wide variety of activities without disturbing other residents or neighbouring properties. It is decorated and furnished to a high standard both internally and externally, and all young people have their own bedroom and ensuite. The garden space is extensive and with a vast array of activities and

equipment for the children to engage in and use.

The home provides care for up to six children, male or female, aged between 12 and 18, for the duration of their needs. Over the past 12 months, nine children have lived at the home, with three of those children living there throughout that duration.

The home was last inspected by Ofsted on 3rd and 4th May 2023 and was judged to be Good in all areas. There were two requirements regarding the need for all carers to have the necessary qualification by the required date, and that records should be completed with better accuracy and in a timelier fashion. The one recommendation related to the need to record why a child has not been made aware of their bedroom being searched. All were actioned following the inspection.

The registered manager has been on extended sickness absence for the latter part of the reporting period with the deputy manager filling this role. As is the requirement by Ofsted, she has submitted her application to become the registered manager. She awaits her fit person interview with the home's Ofsted inspector. Her role as deputy manager has not been filled and as such, she has been effectively fulfilling two roles. While she has managed this remarkably well, it has inevitably had an impact in certain areas. Most notably, and the subject of several discussion and recommendations from the regulation 44 visitors, is how and where they store their records about the children. They have been difficult to find, sometimes confusing to read and not in keeping with the other TfC homes. The acting manager acknowledges this, and it is something she is keen to address when time permits.

Over the past twelve months eighteen recommendations have been made. None of these have raised concerns over the safety of the children. Rather they have involved issues such as the need to strengthen and update the homes documentation, obtain missing cared for documentation, communicate with family members, and speed up repairs to the property. Notably both managers have responded swiftly and effectively to the recommendations made.

Despite the number of children living in the home and the presenting risk issues, there have been few incidents of significant concern (7), and even less missing episodes (5). This is testament to the skill set which team members possess alongside the genuine care they have for the children. As a result, the children talk openly and honestly to their carers. The latter part of the reporting period has seen the use of cannabis from two of the young people which has increased. The acting manager is fully aware of this issue and is dealing with it proactively and creatively so that the relationships she and the team have with the children is not damaged.

The key strengths of this home are –

- The relationships the children have with their carers which are based on mutual respect and trust.
- The manager's commitment to her role, and that she works creatively to disrupt unsafe behaviours.

The areas of focus for this home are -

- To continue addressing the children's drug use.
- To improve the location and maintenance of the children's records and to ensure important documents about the children are regularly reviewed and updated by team members to maintain their accuracy.

"A young person who was due to move out of the home said "I have mixed feelings about moving back in with my mum. I will miss the staff, especially P. They have really helped me, and I know they will continue to help me when I leave".

"A young person's father said "he is doing very well, he is supported and cared for. All of his needs are met. He has a positive relationship with all staff and they welcome me when I visit. He likes living there; he much prefers it to foster care".

"A young person's IRO said "I have no concerns with the care that the home provides him with. They regularly keep in touch and report any issues regarding his behaviour and missing episodes. They are really supportive of his family time and any issues regarding fall outs for him. He has stated during reviews that he does feel he is listened to by carers and is able to report concerns. Carers know him well and he does seek out support from them. They will make themselves available to him".

4.6 Nook Lodge



Nook Lodge Children's Home, managed by Mark Cryer, is situated on the outskirts of a housing estate in Sunderland. The home provides care for up to three children, male or female, aged between 10 and 17 years old, for the duration of their needs.

During this reviewing period, three children have lived at the home for the first eight months (April to November) and two thereafter. Given the complex needs in respect of one of the girls, senior managers agreed that no further moves into the home would take place. The home has been in a state of disrepair for several months due to the girl's behaviour. Management made an informed choice to delay work until they had a grip on the behaviour

and a solution that would likely see a reduction in further damage. Maintenance issues have since been reported and the costing agreed however, despite the many requests made by the registered manager, the work remains outstanding. The disrepair of the home makes it an unpleasant environment for the children to live in, and this should be progressed as soon as possible.

The management structure at Nook Lodge replicates that of Maple Cottage's, as the registered and deputy manager oversee both homes. The two managers have a positive, professional working relationship with each other and have established a committed team in both homes, following a period of unsettlement due seniors covering both homes, vacancies, and sick leave. A restructure has taken place which is benefitting both homes, all of whom have a similar skill base, in terms of knowledge and experienced.

The last Ofsted inspection was undertaken on 11/12th October 2023, with an outcome of requires improvement to be good in all three areas. Whilst inspectors reported 'the home was not delivering good help and care to the children and young people', they stated, 'there were no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted'. Four requirements were made relating to planning, training, and recruitment. One recommendation was made in relation to allowing the children access to all shared areas of the home. This was in response to the children's main supply of snacks being locked away, although they had access to their daily supply. The action of storing snacks separately was agreed to support one of the children who was unable to manage her snacks appropriately which resulted in her consuming large amounts of chocolate. The registered manager addressed all issues and during the Assurance Visit undertaken on 19th March 2024, a more positive response was shared by the inspectors.

The October 2023 inspection happened soon after one child, with complex behavioural issues, moved out and two children moved in, (September 23) both of whom presented similarly, with complex behavioural needs. After a short period of time, it was clear the dynamics of the group were unmanageable, resulting in an alternative provision being identified for one of the children.

The moves and the disrepair of the home impacted upon the child who has lived at the home throughout the changes. She continues to express concerns, formally to her social worker, and via her Mind of My Own app, however, feels her social worker is not listening to her. Support and regular meetings continue to take place to explore her wishes and feelings, and the registered manager has raised the issues with senior personnel and further discussions are taking place about a potential move for the child who is presenting difficulties. The regulation 44 visitors continue to monitor this issue.

During this reporting period, announced and unannounced visits were generally positive although highlighted some concerns, primarily in relation to the demands on the senior team in both homes, as this issue impacted upon their management and oversight of day-to-day issues. This issue is now resolved.

The physical and emotional well-being of the children, their education and social needs have been supported, at this home, despite some concerns raised throughout this analysis. Carers worked hard to identify the correct education provision for the children, and attendance for one has consistently been reported as 100%, the other child is also making progress. No concerns were noted regarding the children's health needs, and both had access to a variety of opportunities and hobbies they are interested in.

In short, despite the negative outcome of the Ofsted inspection and the issues relating to senior cover and the behaviour of some of the children, carers at this home endeavoured to ensure that the children were safe, supported and cared for.

The strengths of this home are –

- Team members have the skills, knowledge, and experience to care for the children and consistently seek advice/support from the psychologist for cared for children, to support the children's emotional well-being.

- There are only two children living at this home as senior managers recognise that the dynamics of the children would not lend to a third child moving in, currently. This is positive as it enables the team to work more closely and intensively with each child.

The areas of focus for this home are -

- The home is in a state of disrepair, issues need to be progressed, as soon as possible, to provide the children a comfortable, aesthetically pleasing home to live in.
- The rear garden would also benefit from updating to enable the children to use the garden more.

“A young person’s SW stated, “I have no concerns about the quality of care afforded to her. All of her needs are met in this home, and she continues to make progress. She is more settled now that the other young person has moved out and she is spending more time with the carer”.”

“A young person said “she likes her bedroom and enjoys many of the activities on offer, particularly rock wall climbing, cycling, swimming, and going to the fair”. She also enjoys going to cadets and the Change Council.

She feels listened to and said carers respond kindly to her. She referred to the fact that she does not like some of the meals made, however, is able to choose her favourites, to include beans on white toast.”

“A young person’s gran was very complimentary of the team’s care of her granddaughter and is of the opinion that she is making progress at the home, and she feels she has settled down significantly following the move of another young person.”

4.7 Revelstoke Road



Revelstoke Road Children’s Home, managed by Mark Christie, is located within Sunderland North-West. It is decorated to an acceptable standard; however, all rooms are currently being updated. Externally, the gardens are maintained to a good standard, and accommodate a large summer house for the children to enjoy together, with their friends or as an area to ‘chill out’. All children have their own bedroom but share bathroom/toilet facilities.

The home provides therapeutic care for up to six children, male or female, aged between 10 and 17 years old, for the duration of their needs. Currently there are two 17-year-old children, two 14-year-old children and two 11-year-old children, therefore a real mixture in ages, strengths, and needs.

The last Ofsted inspection, undertaken on 23th and 24th May 2023 rated the home Good, however Requires Improvement in the area of Help and Protect. The inspector identified that children’s risk assessments did not contain all of the necessary information. In addition, on one occasion the

missing from home protocol was not followed. The management team responded swiftly to address these concerns.

This home has an established, experienced senior team, all of whom are appropriately qualified to manage the team and provide therapeutic care to all children. The team's ethos is, 'to use the "Therapeutic Reparenting" model to help young people be the best they can be and reach their potential by repairing developmental trauma. Children will experience the unconditional love, care, and attention that a 'good enough' parent would provide'.

Certainly, from observations and through discussion with professionals involved with the children, the team support the children exactly as their ethos describes. An example of this relates to one of the children who moved to live at the home in December 22, whilst he was born a female he identifies as a male. This child had also experienced familial trauma whilst at home, therefore arrived with very complex behaviour and emotional needs, hence, initially, the many recorded critical incidents, missing from care episodes, self-harming injuries, and reports to Ofsted. With the therapeutic intervention and support provided by the team, and external agencies, it has been with great pleasure to engage with a much calmer, happier child, who rarely engages in the concerning behaviour highlighted above. This is without doubt a credit to the team.

During this reporting period, announced and unannounced visits highlighted that whilst the team were managing difficult and complex behaviour, particularly in relation to one child, all children were provided with one-to-one time and many celebrations were recorded. From April 23 to August 23, three children were cared for. The reason for this was due to the presenting behaviour of one of the children, whose behaviour was impacting upon the children and the team's management of them. The team were of the view that no further moves should be agreed until the child's behaviour improved however, he returned to live with his family, following which more moves to the home were supported.

Despite the concerns noted, missing from care episodes, (97), critical incidents (45), Ofsted notifications (30), only ten recommendations were made throughout the reporting period. This would suggest that the team responded appropriately to all issues they were faced with, and safeguarded the children, using their therapeutic re-parenting response and by working in partnership with other agencies.

The physical and emotional well-being of the children, their education and social needs have been consistently met, to a good standard. Most of the children had access to an education placement and were supported to attend and achieve, all had access to a variety of opportunities to include activities (cinema trips, trampoline parks, walks, park visits and beach trips) and hobbies (swimming lessons) they are interested in, and their emotional well-being needs, were met.

The strengths of this home are –

- All team members have the skills, experience, and knowledge, to provide the children with a therapeutic re-parenting response which is positively impacting upon them. All young children have therapeutic plans that are reviewed, by the team and the psychologist linked to the home.
- The team have managed to adapt their parenting of the varying ages of children, to meet their individual needs. They have also supported the older children to be more accepting of the younger ones more childlike (silly) behaviour, which has been a challenge, at times.

The areas of focus for this home are -

- The home needs to be updated and decorated throughout. Timescales for the work would enable the children to know when their home will be refurbished to a more acceptable standard.
- To help those children who choose not to go to school to complete homework tasks at home.

A young person reported that he felt welcomed by the team when he moved in, was shown around the home and all rules were explained to him. He felt cared for, relaxed, and enjoyed the activities on offer and that he likes his bedroom.

A young person's social worker stated, she has settled in well and has received lots of support from the staff. I am kept updated with any worries and communication between myself and staff is excellent. Her bedroom has been decorated to suit her own taste, she is in a routine and responds well to the boundaries in place. Communication is also very good between previous carers -who still care for her twin sister – and they support her with emotions around family time. All meetings are attended to share information with the care team'.

A young person's independent reviewing officer reported "she has only recently moved into the home and so far, she has settled in well and I have observed lots of emotional warmth shown to her by carers at the home, something that she hasn't had in her previous home. Carers have been very engaging with myself and attended her care review meeting and provided me with updates and explained about the therapeutic parenting that they can offer her whilst living there. She will be moving schools, and they will support her with this".

together for
children

ADOPTION SUNDERLAND

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland NMS 25 Report 2023/24

CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction**
- 2 Legislation, Regulations and Guidance**
- 3 Key Requirements of Local Authority Adoption Services**
- 4 Adoption Support Services 4**
- 5 The National Minimum Standards – Adoption**
- 6 Organisation**
- 7 Staffing**
- 8 Statement of Purpose and Recruitment Plan**
- 9 Adoption Timeliness Data Analysis**
- 10 Achievements 2023/24**
- 11 Outsourced Services**
- 12 Non agency adoption**
- 13 The Inspection of Local Authority Adoption Agencies**
- 14 Complaints and compliments**
- 15 Challenges and priorities for the year ahead**
- 16 Conclusions**

1 INTRODUCTION

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland has been in operation since 31st March 2017) and provides Adoption services on behalf of Sunderland City Council.

The main priorities of Together for Children Adoption Sunderland are:

- To achieve forever homes for cared for children for whom adoption is the Care Plan, with appropriate approved adopters, matched according to the children's specific needs and circumstances and within appropriate timescales.
- To prepare, assess and support prospective adopters who are likely to be able to meet the needs of the children waiting for families across the RAA, North East and nationally.
- To provide post placement and post Order support to adoptive families.
- Birth Record Counselling for adopted adults
- Birth Family Support for families whose children are adopted

The needs of the children requiring forever homes are the agency's paramount consideration.

Adopt Coast to Coast launched on the 1st April 2021. Durham County Council and Together for Children/Sunderland are the spokes that continue to deliver their local authorities statutory adoption functions. They do so under the coordination and support of a Head of Service who has have overall responsibility for quality management and practice oversight. The recruitment and associated activity which includes the website, Facebook etc is managed in the Hub by a dedicated Communications and Marketing Manager.

The shared vision -

Coast to Coast will deliver high quality, adoption services across the three local authority areas, raising performance to the levels of the highest performing Adoption Agencies and improving outcomes for children across the region.

2 LEGISLATION, REGULATIONS AND GUIDANCE

There is a range of Legislation, Regulations and Guidance, which influence the working of Adoption Agencies. These include:

- The Children Acts of 1989 and 2004
- The Care Standards Act 2000
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (revised 2011)
- The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011)
- The Children and Adoption Act 2006
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010
- Adopters Charter 2011
- Adoption Statutory Guidance 2011 and 2013
- The Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012
- Action Plan for Adoption Tackling Delay 2012
- The Children and Families Act 2014
- The Adoption Minimum Standards 2014

3 KEY REQUIREMENTS OF LOCAL AUTHORITY ADOPTION SERVICES

The key requirements of all Local Authority Adoption Services have not changed significantly since the formation of Together for Children Adoption Sunderland. These are that:

- The focus is firmly on the needs of the child, whose needs will be paramount in all decisions relating to adoption
- Highly skilled professionals lead a quality service delivered to National Minimum Standards
- A permanency plan is identified for all cared for children within four months of them coming into Local Authority care. (This may be a return home, or any of a range of different permanent home options, one of which is adoption)
- Focused effort goes into finding permanent families for all cared for children waiting to be adopted
- A range of potential adopters are welcomed and assessed efficiently in an open and fair way
- Children and their adoptive families have easy access to adoption support services

4 ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICES

Support to the prospective adopters assessed by Together for Children Adoption Sunderland is provided by Social Workers within the Service from the point of a child/children going to live with them and up to three years post Order.

After 3 years, the support needs of the adoptive family transfer to the Local Authority where they reside. Whilst many adopters live in Sunderland's local authority boundaries such services are also delivered to Sunderland's previously cared for children by the other Adopt Coast to Coast spoke. Likewise, year on year children matched from outside the region with adoptive families living in Sunderland and approved by other adoption agencies become our responsibility under the 3-year rule.

Birth families have been provided with support services from PAC-UK this has ensured that independent support is available and is offered via a service level agreement between Together for Children Adoption Sunderland and PAC-UK.

Access to their records for adopted adults and counselling support is provided by Social Workers within the service. This remains the same with 8 adults supported within this reporting period.

Theraplay from within the adoption team has been provided for 4 children. The therapeutic training across the staff group also includes DDP, therapeutic life story work and the Solihull Parenting programme. In this period 7 of the 10 staff team have completed level 1 DDP training, as well as 1 member of staff completing the BUSS model therapy. MDASS- Multi-disciplinary adoption support services (MDASS) is creating a multi-disciplinary team to transform the delivery of adoption support for children and their families across twelve Local Authority areas via the 3 regional adoption agencies. It is anticipated that the MDASS will make a significant contribution to meeting the ambition of the National Adoption Strategy 2021 for excellence by reducing variation in services and strengthening both practice and the support offer available.

The central funding is recruiting a team of multi-disciplinary practitioners (social workers, psychologists, speech and language therapy and occupational therapists led by a service manager) to explore and test their impact on improving outcomes for adopted children. Working pan-regionally the team will provide both in-person and virtual consultancy to the professional network around a child and also delivering some direct assessments when appropriate. The team will work across the continuum of adoption support, integrating with First Response, Early Help, Social Work Assessment, Specialist Support, Commissioning and linking with education and health colleagues.

We are utilising the opportunity afforded by developing pan-regional adoption support to partner with the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board

(ICB) in strengthening existing pathways for children with complex needs and developing new ones, jointly working on Complex Commissioning and care pathways for children with neurodevelopmental needs.

We operate our Post-box Service and currently there are 620 active post-box files. This is an increase (104) on the previous period, and this is in keeping with an increase in the number of children matched in this reporting period as well as the reviewing of Post Box agreements. The overseeing of post-box correspondence and responding to enquiries is a whole team task undertaken on duty.

Post Adoption Assessments	No completed	Within 6 weeks	Over 6 weeks	% completed in timescales*
21-22	69	60	9	87%
22-23	71	57	14	80%
23-24	79	70	9	87%
*NB this 6-week timescale is set by TfC, as a measure of best practice				

The requests for post adoption support have increased slightly on the previous year's figures.

Reviews of post adoption assessments are included on LCS, so reports are able to evidence this statutory aspect of adoption practice.

5 The National Minimum Standards – Adoption

The Adoption National Minimum Standards came into force in April 2003 and were updated in April 2011. Local Authority adoption agencies are expected to fully comply with the Minimum Standards which cover all areas of an agency's responsibilities and function.

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland's procedures are fully compliant with both the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (revised February 2011) and the Adoption National Minimum Standards.

Following the launch of the Regional Adoption Agency a revised Statement of Purpose was completed and was provided to Ofsted and is available on our website and Adopt Coast to Coast's.

6 Organisation

The Service has all of the necessary key documents in place including:

- Statement of Purpose
- Adopt Coast to Coast's Recruitment Strategy for Prospective Adopters
- The Service has comprehensive written procedures.

7 STAFFING

Current staffing levels

The current team consists of:

- Responsible Individual – Head of Service – Full time
- ADM – Head of Service – Full time
- Registered Manager and Panel Advisor – Full Time
- Service Manager and Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) – Service Manager – Full time
- Assistant Team Manager (1 posts) (F/T)
- Adoption Social Workers (3 posts) (F/T)
- Adoption Social Workers (3 posts) (.8 post)
- Adoption Social Workers (4 post) (.6 post)
- Administrator (Letterbox) (1 post) (1 x .5 posts)
- Senior Panel Administrator (1 posts) (.5 post)
- Team Administrator (1 post) (.5 post)

Team administrators and Panel administrators are centrally managed as part of the Together for Children Sunderland business support.

Business support is provided to Together for Children Adoption Sunderland from the business support team within Together for Children.

8 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland has a Statement of Purpose and is referenced in the Adopt Coast to Coast Statement of Purpose. The hub lead in the recruitment of prospective adopters and the dedicated Communications and Marketing Manager works closely with the comms leads in each spoke. The recruitment strategy is regularly reviewed to ensure it is meeting the recruitment needs of the spokes. Together for Children Adoption Sunderland are responsible for following all enquiries received by them and a comprehensive written plan is in place and is compliant with all current legislation, regulations, standards, and best practice guidance.

9 ADOPTION TIMELINESS DATA ANALYSIS

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland monitor the child's journey from the child becoming Cared For to be being adopted in line with the DfE threshold.

- The number of days from a child becoming Looked After to the Decision to Place for Adoption has decreased by 79 days to 156 from the figure reported in the previous report.
- In respect of the number of days from the date of Decision to Place to Placement Order date, this has increased by 3 days to 59. This remains a positive performance.
- The number of days from Placement Order date to Date of Matching decreased from 215 days to 159 days.
- The date of a child starting to be Cared For to the date of moving for Adoption decreased from 423 days to 369 days. This is very positive performance.

The practice within Together for Children continues to be child led and there has been an increase in Best Interests decisions have increased from 34 in the previous reporting year to 36 this reporting year. Placement Orders have slightly increased by 1 to 29.

Adoptive family approvals:

During the period 2023/24 a total of 22 prospective adopters were approved, which is a decrease of 2 on the previous year. 5 of the prospective adopters were adopting for a second time and as such were progressed onto Stage 2 of the adopter recruitment process.

Timeliness of adopters' assessments:

Of the 17 approved prospective adopters who entered Stage 1, 8 were completed within stage 1 timescales. For all of the prospective adopters who did not complete stage 1 in statutory timescales, the delays were linked to DBS, medical timescales and further exploration regarding medical and mental health checks being required. The timeliness of Stage 1 remains a national issue for the reasons highlighted above and remains a focus for development within the service.

Of the above 22 approved 18 were within the timescale, 4 prospective adopter Stage Two Assessments were not completed within the 4-month timescale.

In this period, 28 children were matched and placed, a decrease of 2 on the previous reporting year. There have been 36 Adoption Orders granted within this reporting period, an increase of 4 on the previous year.

10 ACHIEVEMENTS 2023/24

Children and Adopters

The above data demonstrates the wide-ranging progress in improving outcomes for children and prospective adopters within Sunderland. This is even more impressive in the context of the complex physical needs of some of the children linked and matched. As 4 of the 28 children matched were placed with prospective adopters approved by other agencies this increases the workload for staff. There were also 2 of the children matched who were identified as having a disability, 12 of the 28 children are part of a brothers and sisters' group and 14 children who are categorised as harder to place because of their age which are all a credit to the staff.

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland has a consistent enhanced support offer:

- £265,129.00 has been claimed from the ASF following 77 successful applications.
- Disruptions –
21/22 – 1, 22/23 – 2, 23/24 - 0

The thorough assessments of prospective adopters, the strong matching practice and the rigorous oversight of the Adoption Panel and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) have resulted in 0 disruptions in this reporting period.

Engagement with Adopters

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland is mindful of the benefits of engaging with prospective and approved adopters around Service Development at all levels. The positive track record has continued despite the challenges of this year and Microsoft Teams has been utilised for virtual support groups.

Adopt Coast to Coast's Stakeholder Engagement Strategy sets out the RAAs activity to gather the views and lived experience of enquirers, prospective adopters, and adopters. The experiences and views shared through the engagement activity is shared across the year with each spoke and this supports Together for Children in reviewing their day-to-day practice alongside developing the adoption practice across the RAA.

Engagement with Children

- Crafty Kidz is an informal support group offering craft-based activities to children and their families from the start of them living with their forever family.
- An adopted young person is an established member of Together for Children's Change Council.
- We complete an annual adopter survey to seek the views of adopted children/young people on specific issues. This service allows for the completion of anonymous surveys and provides feedback to the service about how we are doing and what we could do better.

11 OUTSOURCED SERVICES

Inter-country Adoption

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland has established a contract with The Inter-country Adoption Centre (<http://www.icacentre.org.uk/>) to provide Inter-country Adoption Services to residents living within the Sunderland area who want to adopt from abroad.

The Inter-country Adoption centre (IAC) provides counselling and information to applicants enquiring about adoption from abroad. The IAC also undertakes the preparation and home study assessments of applicants who decide to pursue a formal inter-country adoption application and on completion applicants are considered by the IAC's Adoption Panel.

Birth Family Support

PAC-UK have been providing independent Birth family support since 1st May 2023. Within this reporting year there have been 31 new referrals and 28 existing birth family members who were previously working with ARC when the contract was with them. The support is being provided to 50 first family/ birth parents and 9 first family/ birth relatives. Over this period there have been 115 appointments arranged and only 23 that were either cancelled or there was non-attendance.

Birth parents complete baseline reporting to document their journey in a quantitative way. This looks at the birth parents understanding of the adoption process, their general wellbeing and understanding of the letterbox process. Birth parents undertake the baseline reporting at the beginning and end of the intervention to look at progress made.

First Family Facebook Group

This closed and well monitored group is allowing birth parents to share thoughts and feelings around adoption as well as for PAC-UK to post useful links to help and resources around e.g. mental health and domestic violence, and Sunderland parents contribute to the peer support through this forum. The Facebook group has grown to include other birth parents from PAC-UK regions throughout the country who can offer peer support to each other with the oversight of staff as admin and moderators – the group now has over 160 members.

Online Support Group

At PAC-UK they have a wider first family online support group for birth family that meets monthly. This is for birth parents across the RAA's PAC-UK are commissioned by across the North of England and is available for Sunderland Parents to access.

Once a cohort of birth family has been established within the area, we would like to consider an in person monthly support group for families to access once they have completed their 10 sessions of support. This will be an exit strategy for families coming to the end of their one-to-one support and will allow for ongoing support needs to be met via staff and peers.

Quarterly meetings are held with PAC-UK to continually monitor the support being provided.

12 NON-AGENCY ADOPTION

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland continues to receive a steady flow of interest from stepparents in respect of in-family adoptions.

In-family applications that relate to children who are within their birth families and not in local authority care are allocated for completion of the necessary enquiries and Court Report/s when notification is received from the Court. It is usual for contact to be made prior to the applicant registering their application with the Court and support/advice is given as appropriate. The decision not to allocate until formal request from the Court is made is in line with the number of applicants that expressed an interest and then did not pursue via the Court.

In this reporting period, Together for Children Adoption Sunderland have had 25 referrals and completed 25 reports.

13 THE INSPECTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY ADOPTION AGENCIES

Together for Sunderland Adoption Sunderland was inspected as part of OFSTED's Single Inspection Framework for Child Protection and Looked After Children in June 2021. This framework was introduced in September 2013 and includes the inspection of local authorities' fostering and adoption functions. Adoption Agency work is given a separate judgment within the wider inspection framework.

In addition, As Together for Children Adoption Sunderland is registered as a Voluntary Adoption Agency it received an OFSTED inspection relating solely to the Adoption Services that it is registered to provide in November 2022. The agency received an overall 'good' judgement.

14 COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

In the period 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024 there were no complaints relating to Together for Children Adoption Sunderland. There were 6 compliments received.

15 CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

To continue to support the development of relationships between staff across Adopt Coast to Coast, recognising that these relationships will contribute to our shared vision.

To work collaboratively with our partner in Adopt Coast to Coast to improve consistency of practice particularly in the recruitment of prospective adopters, linking, matching and introductions.

To continue to improve the performance of the service regarding assessment timeliness.

To continue to enhance the therapeutic support that is provided by the team.

To work with the hub in developing consistent feedback/engagement opportunities from children and young people to help shape Adopt Coast to Coast and the 2 spokes.

To engage in the early permanence, pan regional project to improve the opportunities for children to be placed earlier across the North East.

16 CONCLUSIONS

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland continues to perform highly and this was recognised in the OFSTED inspection. We continue to endeavour to achieve timely forever homes for children requiring adoption through the Link Maker portal for Adopt Coast to Coast. Early Permanence is considered for all children and there is a strong consistent practice across Together for Children.

Positive working relationships are well established between the Adoption Service and the locality teams within Together for Children and shared planning can be clearly evidenced.

The feedback received from adopters engaged with Together for Children Adoption Sunderland is generally very positive.

Michelle Ash

Registered Manager Adoption

June 2024

SUPPORTIVE PARENTING PARTNERSHIP

8 July 2024

WORK PROGRAMME 2024/2025

Report of the Assistant Director of Law and Governance

1. Purpose of the Report

To inform the Supportive Parenting Partnership of the draft work programme for the municipal year 2024/2025 and forthcoming agenda items.

2. Work Programme

WORK PROGRAMME 2024/2025		
Meeting Date	Agenda Items	Officer Responsible
15 July 2024	Health of Cared for Children CNTW Children and Young People's Cared for Pathway Regulation 44 Visits Annual Adoption Report	Stephen Edgeley Samantha Diston Gillian Hammell-Purvis Kathryn McCabe
7 October 2024	Change Council Update Update from the Virtual School IRO Annual Report Annual Fostering Report	Alexandra Bowey Anita Swales Gillian Hammell-Purvis Kathryn McCabe
20 January 2025	Health of Cared for Children CNTW Children and Young People's Cared for Pathway	Stephen Edgeley Samantha Diston
7 April 2025	Change Council Update Virtual School Annual Report	Alexandra Bowey Anita Swales

Items to be added to the Work Programme at an appropriate time: Kinship Strategy

3. Recommendations

The Board is asked to note the work programme and suggest any additional topics which may be discussed at a future meeting.

