

together for
children

ADOPTION SUNDERLAND

Together for Children Adoption
Sunderland NMS 25 Report
2023/24

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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