



Together for Children Adoption Sunderland NMS 25 Report 2022/23

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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. Though many adopters live in Sunderland's local authority boundaries the conclusion of the Regional Adoption Agency programme may see an increase in such services being delivered to Sunderland's previously cared for children by the other Adopt Coast to Coast spokes. Likewise, year on year children placed 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 ARC Adoption Northeast (ARC), this has ensured that independent support is available and is offered via a service level agreement between Together for Children Adoption Sunderland and ARC.

Access to their records for adopted adults and counselling support is provided by Social Workers within the service. This remains the same and increase of 9 respectively on the previous reporting period.

Theraplay from within the adoption team has been provided for 2 children. The therapeutic training across the staff group also includes DDP, therapeutic life story work and the Solihull Parenting programme. In this period all staff have completed the Solihull Parenting programme to support the service's ambition to build a local therapeutic offer for families, both pre and post adoption and in doing so reduce the reliance on commissioned services through the Adoption Support Fund.

We operate our Post-box Service and currently there are 516 active post-box files. This is a increase (14) on the previous period, and this is in keeping with an increase in the number of children placed in this reporting period. 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*
17-18	66	42	24	64%
18-19	45	29	16	64%
19-20	41	35	6	85%
20-21	17	7	10	41%
21-22	69	60	9	87%
22-23	71	57	14	80%
*NB this 6-week timescale is set by TfC, as a measure of best practice				

The requests for post adoption support have decreased 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 ongoing work of the Service is monitored by Together for Children's Board.

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 - Director of Social Care – 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 (2 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.

The Statement of Purpose is due for an annual update in June 2023.

9 ADOPTION TIMELINESS DATA ANALYSIS

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland monitor the child's journey from the child becoming Looked After to 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 6 days to 235 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 reduced by 10 days to 56. This is very positive performance.
- The number of days from Placement Order date to Date of Matching increased from 151 days to 215. This is an increase however during this reporting period there have been more children matched who have complex needs, children who are older as well as more groups of 2 and 3 children, which takes more planning.
- The date of a child starting to be Looked After to the date of placement for Adoption decreased from 462 days to 423 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 29 in the previous reporting year to 34 this reporting year. Placement Orders have slightly decreased by 4 to 28 this can still be attributed particularly at the beginning of this reporting period, to the Somerset Judgement and which the majority of adoption agencies have experienced delays in the making of Placement Orders, the matching of children and the granting of Adoption Orders which comes on the back of the remaining Court delays following COVID.

Adoptive family approvals:

During the period 2022/23 a total of 28 prospective adopters were approved, an increase of 2 on the previous year. 2 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 28 approved prospective adopters who entered Stage 1, none were completed within stage 1 timescales, this is a decrease on the previous year's 35%. 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 being needed. The timeliness of Stage 1 remains a national issue for the reasons highlighted above.

Of the above 28 approved, 10 prospective adopter Stage Two Assessments was not completed within the 4-month timescale. The reason for this was that for one the adopters required their medicals to be redone as they were completed as TFC foster carers and were unable to arrange this appointment with their GP. Additional Overseas checks were required on another couple, one couple we had to delay going to panel as the male applicant had not advised us that he was still smoking, one was 1 day over the 4 months another 4 days over, we have had to have review Adoption Medicals completed on a couple of these couple's as new information became known during assessment that needed to be explored further and updated prior to attending panel. We have subsequently adapted both the midway review paperwork and quality assurance processes to monitor the timeliness of stage 2 more closely moving forward.

In this period, 34 children were matched and placed an increase of 2 on the previous year. The Somerset Judgement has had widespread impact across RAAs and the spokes in Adopt Coast to Coast. There have been 32 Adoption Orders granted within this reporting period. This is an decrease of 4 on the previous year. We have still experienced issues with court's availability particularly in the earlier parts of this reporting period due to the ongoing impact of the Somerset Judgement and the pandemic.

10 ACHIEVEMENTS 2021/22

Children and Adopters

The above data demonstrates the wide-ranging progress in improving outcomes for children and prospective adopters. This is even more impressive in the context of the complex physical needs of some of these children. As 7 of the 34 children matched were placed with prospective adopters approved by other agencies this increases the workload for staff and it is to their credit.

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

- £196,861.28 has been claimed from the ASF following 61 successful applications.
- Disruptions –
17/18 – 2, 18/19 – 0, 19/20 – 1, 20/21 – 0, 21/22 – 1, 22/23 - 2

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 only 2 disruptions in this period. Disruption meetings were held, and the practice developments actioned by the Agency.

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. Regular activity packs for children are well received.

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.

In addition to local activity, the RAA is part of a national marketing group and the experiences of mystery shoppers engaging with Adopt Coast to Coast and the spokes is now provided quarterly.

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. This has been re-established and the yearly dates have now been set.
- An adopted young person is an established member of Together for Children's Change Council.
- We complete an annual 'survey monkey' to seek the views of adopted children/young people on specific issues. This service allows for the completion of anonymous surveys.

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

The contract with ARC ceased on 1st May 2023 and the new contract will be undertaken by PAC-UK. The contract with ARC covered support for birth families in engaging with post-box arrangements, facilitating the contribution of birth family members in life-story work, supporting birth family members in terms of their engagement at all stages of the adoption process, support birth family members meeting adoptive parents. Birth families are advised of this independent service, and where they indicate a wish to be supported, a referral is made to ARC on their behalf. Between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023, 50 birth family members were engaged with the service, of this number 42 were ongoing referrals for previous years. The activity reporting from ARC for the final quarter indicated 47 birth family members actively worked with them and 4 families who did not engage. Quarterly performance and monitoring meetings have been embedded to ensure the service is meeting the needs of birth families and offers value for money. Feedback from birth families has been requested sooner than the end of intervention with the hopes of improving the response rate.

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 20 referrals and completed 10 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.

Together for Children received an overall rating of outstanding within this inspection with Adoption Services being judged as 'outstanding.'

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 2021 – 31st March 2022 there was 1 complaint relating to Together for Children Adoption Sunderland. There were 9 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 excellent record of the service regarding 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

Team Manager Adoption

May 2023

