



# Together for Children Adoption Sunderland NMS 25 Report 2017/18

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# **1 INTRODUCTION**

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

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland (on behalf of Sunderland City Council) is currently in the process of jointly negotiating to become part of a larger Regional Adoption Agency, with Cumbria County Council, Durham County Council and a number of VAA's. It is currently anticipated that the new Regional Adoption Agency will 'go live' in Quarter 3 of 2019/20.

The main priorities of Together for Children Adoption Sunderland are:

- To achieve the placement of children in care 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 recruit, prepare and assess adoptive applicants who are likely to be able to meet the placement needs of the children waiting for families both locally 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 placement are the agency's paramount consideration.

# **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 and supporting statutory guidance and regulations;
- The Care Standards Act 2000;
- The Adoption Act 2002;

- The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011);
- The Children and Adoption Act 2006;
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 and accompanying statutory guidance;
- The National Minimum Standards for Adoption (2011);
- Adoption Statutory Guidance 2011;
- The Children and Families Act 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 children in care within four months of them coming into Local Authority care. (This may be a return home, or any of a range of different placement options, one of which is adoption);
- Focused effort goes into finding permanent families for all children in care 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 recruited by Together for Children Adoption Sunderland is provided by social workers within the service from the point of placement and up to three years post Order. Following the making of an Adoption Order responsibility for post Order support lies with the Local Authority area within which the adopters live, for many this may remain as Together for Children Adoption Sunderland.

Birth families are provided with support services from ARC Adoption, this ensures independent support is available and is offered via a service level agreement between Together for Children Adoption Sunderland and ARC Adoption.

Access to their records for adopted adults and counselling support is provided by social workers within the service. In the year 2017/18 this service has been provided for 15 clients. Intermediary services have been provided to 3 people for the same period.

In addition social workers within the team provide therapy for children pre and post placement, in the year 2017/18 therapy has been provided to 22 children. Alongside this, training in therapy techniques is provided for foster carers, prospective adopters and adopters.

We operate our Postbox Service and currently there are 690 active post-box files. All team members are involved in proof reading post-box correspondence and responding to enquiries. One team member takes overall responsibility for overseeing and developing the post-box Service. There is dedicated admin support for the post-box service.

<b>Post Adoption Assessments</b>	<b>No completed</b>	<b>Within 6 weeks</b>	<b>Over 6 weeks</b>	<b>% completed in timescales</b>
15-16	54	37	17	69%
16-17	33	18	15	55%
17-18	66	42	24	64%

NB this 6 week timescale is set by TFC and not DfE led

## 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 Statement of Purpose and procedures are fully compliant with both the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (revised February 2011) and the Adoption National Minimum Standards.

## **6 Organisation**

The ongoing work of the Service is monitored by a sub-committee of Together for Children's Board.

The sub-committee was established in 2017 and meets regularly and reports to the Together for Children Board. The sub-committee has agreed Terms of Reference.

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

- Statement of Purpose (2017),
- Policy and Plan on the Recruitment of Prospective Adopters (2017),
- The Service has comprehensive written procedures.

## **7 STAFFING**

Current staffing levels

The current team consists of:

- Responsible Individual and ADM – Director of Social Care – Full time
- Registered Manager and Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) - Lead manager for fostering and adoption – Full time
- Panel Adviser (0.5 post)
- Marketing and Recruitment Officer (0.5 post)
- Assistant Team Managers (2 posts) (F/T)
- Adoption Social Workers (5 posts)(F/T)
- Adoption Social Workers (2 posts) (.8 post)
- Adoption Social Workers (1 post) (.6 post)
- Adoption Support Worker (1 post) (F/T hours)
- Administrator (Letterbox) (1 post) (2 x .5 posts)
- Social Care Assistant (1 posts) (F/T hours)
- 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.

The Lead Manager for Fostering and Adoption is currently a temporary one year position, running until September 2018, one of the Assistant Team Manager's within the team is seconded on a temporary one year basis to the fostering team (running until October 2018) with a Social Worker within the adoption team 'acting up' to the position of Assistant Team Manager, also on a temporary one year basis. This post has been backfilled with a social worker on a secondment basis from a team within Together for Children.

The admin services are provided to Together for Children Adoption Sunderland from the admin team within Together for Children.

## **8 THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT REVIEW OF ADOPTION / REGIONALISATION AGENDA**

As detailed above Together for Children Adoption Sunderland (on behalf of Sunderland City Council) is moving forward with plans to become part of a Regional Adoption Agency – Coast to Coast. At the current time it is likely that the launch date for the new service will be in Q3 2019/20. The other participating local authorities will be:

- Cumbria County Council
- Durham County Council

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland are undertaking the project work entailed with the regionalisation programme and are keeping Sunderland City Council abreast of all developments via the involvement of the Director of Children's Services and regular reporting to Sunderland City Council Cabinet Meetings.

The Department of Education paper published in June 2015 and titled 'Regionalising Adoption', first proposed the creation of Regional Adoption Agencies across the UK and anticipated that the creation of larger agencies, which included the participation of Voluntary Adoption Agencies, should serve to:

- Speed up matching of children with adopters;
- Improve adopter recruitment to make sure that it is more effective and linked to the needs of children waiting;
- Ensure that high quality adoption support services are available nationally;
- Reduce costs;
- Encourage specialisation;

- Broaden strategic planning;
- Encourage innovation and investment.

## **9 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND RECRUITMENT PLAN**

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland has a Statement of Purpose and a written plan relating to the recruitment of adoptive parents both of which are compliant with all current legislation, regulations, standards and best practice guidance.

The Statement of Purpose has been reviewed (August 2017) in light of the formation of Together for Children Adoption Sunderland as a Voluntary Adoption Agency.

The Statement of Purpose and Recruitment Plan are reviewed annually.

## **10 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 was 291 in 2017 and dropped to 238 days in 2018. This figure has improved over 3 years and for the last 2 years has been below the National average.
- There were 80 days in 2017 and 76 days in 2018 from the date of Decision to Place to Placement Order date.
- The number of days from Placement Order date to Date of Matching was 172 for 2017 and fell to 162 days for 2018. This figure has been improving over 3 year averages and was below the England average in the previous year.
- The figures for Date of Matching to date Placed for Adoption are currently unavailable.
- The date of a child starting to be Looked After to the date of placement for Adoption was 534 days in 2017 and fell to 518 days in 2018.

NB The above data is to the end of Q3 for both 2017 and 2018 as the data for Q4 in 2018 is not yet available.



### **Adoptive family approvals:**

During the period 2017/18 a total of 26 prospective adopters were approved, this consisted of 5 single adopters and 21 couples.

### **Timeliness of adopters' assessments:**

Of the above 26 approved prospective adopters, 19 Stage One Assessments were completed within timescales, the 7 completed outside of timescales were as a result of delays with statutory checks.

Of the above 26 approved prospective adopters, 24 Stage Two Assessments were completed within timescale. Of the two Stage 2 assessments which were out of timescale, one was delayed as a result of procedural issues and the other was as a result of a request for further information by the Panel Advisor.

## **11 ACHIEVEMENTS 2017/18**

### **Children and Adopters**

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland achieved the placement of 52 children with prospective adopters in the period April 2017 / March 2018. Of these 52 children, 42% were 'hard to place.'

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland achieved 12 early permanence placements in 2017/18, a marked increase to the 5 achieved in 2016/17 and considerably more than the 1 in 2015/16.

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland has an enhanced support offer;

- Post adoption support within Sunderland has been described by National Adoption Advisor Al Coates as 'very positive and proactive'.
- An adoptive parent was quoted as saying "When you get the right help it's like a precious jewel."
- Joint working with Sunderland University
- £150,000 has been claimed from the ASF following 61 successful applications (2017/18)
- Enhanced support offer, including; Child psychologist available for consultation sessions with both families and staff and an independent counsellor who provides a talking therapy, using a humanist and integrative approach (for adults).
- Reduction in disruptions – 14/15 – 5, 15/16 – 3, 16/17 – 2, 17/18 – 2

## 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 and seeks to do this through:

- Discussions around development issues at the bi-monthly Support Group for approved adopters and quarterly waiting adopters group (offered alongside others within the North East consortium;
- Seeking written feedback about their experiences of working with Together for Children Adoption Sunderland from adoptive applicants, approved and waiting adopters and legal adopters, at key stages of the adoption process (additional quality assurance has now been developed mid-way through the assessment process and a quality assurance visit is undertaken by an assistant team manager following completion of the assessment and prior to Panel).
- Child Appreciation Days are routinely considered for all children aged three years and over who are placed for adoption as well as for younger children if they have experienced changes of foster-carer. Child Appreciation Days are all run by the Together for Children Adoption Sunderland Service.
- The Together for Children Adoption Sunderland bi-monthly Adopters' Support Group is well established, providing an additional avenue of support for approved and waiting adopters. On occasion, as appropriate, this group is opened up to invite prospective adopters within the assessment process.
- We continue to distribute our newsletter quarterly, highlighting relevant adoption news and research both on a regional and national level. We also use this as a way to engage adopters with our locally ran events.
- We continue to offer Crafty Kidz – a craft based activity for adopters and their children, this group has grown from strength to strength with attendance increasing with up to approximately 18 adults attending each session.
- We continue to offer our Summer and Christmas Parties, with our 'new look' Christmas Party held in December 2017, this event was well attended and feedback was positive. These parties not only provide an opportunity for adopters and their children to come together but for some children this provides an opportunity for direct contact with siblings adopted within separate families.

## **Engagement with Children**

- The therapeutic consultative group engages adoptive children, who have been involved in a therapeutic intervention, to feedback and contribute to how our further services for children are going to be developed. To date they have named the group and have continued to engage in theraplay based activities. They are in the process of developing their own logo for the group.
- Crafty Kidz is an informal support group offering craft based activities to children and their families from placement. We now regularly have a large number of children and their families attend on a regular basis and this has enabled siblings to have contact and for friendships to develop, which is positive for everyone. It is a friendly and welcoming event, where at least 16 children regularly attend with their families.

## **12 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**

We have commissioned the provision of Birth Family Support to ARC Adoption, an Voluntary Adoption Agency in Sunderland. This has been ongoing for two years and a recent agreement has been reached taking us through to April 2021. This intervention covers support 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, provide support to birth mothers who have relinquished their children for adoption, support birth family members meeting adoptive parents and there is a support group for birth family members for them to gain peer support. Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018, 25 birth family members were referred to this service. Feedback has been collated by the use of questionnaires, although this is currently being reviewed as it has been identified that there is a low response rate.

## **13 NON-AGENCY ADOPTION**

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland continues to receive a steady flow of interest from step-parents 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.

Within 2017/18 Together for Children Adoption Sunderland has completed the necessary Court reports for 8 in-family adoptions.

## **14 THE INSPECTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY ADOPTION AGENCIES**

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

Sunderland City Council was inspected in 2015 and Adoption Services received a judgement of 'inadequate.'

Together for Children is currently due an OFSTED inspection.

In addition, As Together for Children Adoption Sunderland is registered as a Voluntary Adoption Agency it will receive an OFSTED inspection relating solely to the adoption services that it is registered to provide. The first inspection is due within a year of registration. Registration was received on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 and as such an OFSTED inspection is currently due.

## **15 COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS**

In the period 1st April 2017 – 31st March 2018 one complaint was received relating to Together for Children Adoption Sunderland. The complainant was concerned that she had stopped receiving letters from her birth child who was adopted some time ago and she questioned the agency's response that this was the child's decision. This complaint was not upheld.

During the same period 8 compliments were received relating to Together for Children Adoption Sunderland, these compliments covered both pre and post Adoption Order work.

## **16 CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE YEAR AHEAD**

To continue to support the development of a Regional Adoption Agency (in line with government expectations) ensuring that Together for Children Adoption Sunderland takes a key role in contributing to the design of the new service and the development of future practice in all areas.

To support Together for Children with their forthcoming OFSTED Inspection with the intention of achieving a rating of 'Good' for the company's adoption services.

To continue to improve the excellent record of the service regarding timeliness.

To continue to seek feedback from the adopters with whom we work regarding all aspects of the service and to establish a 'survey monkey' to enable adopters to anonymously provide their views.

To establish a 'survey monkey' for children who have been adopted and to use the information received to help to shape our service.

To embed the feedback process from birth family members who use services from ARC Adoption, where they are spoken to directly and their verbal feedback is recorded and used to shape future provision.

To continue to enhance our therapeutic work that is provided to children pre and post adoption order and to continue to develop the engagement group recently established.

## **17 CONCLUSIONS**

The landscape of adoption continues to change both nationally and locally as the Governments Regionalisation of Adoption agenda is driven forward.

Together for Children Adoption Sunderland continues to strive to be at the forefront of good adoption practice. The Agency has achieved significant success in achieving timely placements for children requiring adoption and placing children within early Permanence Placements when appropriate to the needs and circumstances of individual 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. This has meant that children in need of placement have been identified at an early stage and many children with complex needs have been securely placed for adoption.

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

The coming year will be a period of further significant changes for Together for Children Adoption Sunderland as we continue to develop the proposals to become part of a larger Regional Adoption Agency – Coast to Coast. However, these are interesting times as evidence to date continues to support that shared adoption services, with a focussed approach and a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, can be a highly successful form of service delivery.

Kathryn McCabe

Lead Manager Fostering and Adoption

April 2018