

# Durham County Council Adoption Service

## Statement of Purpose

**2023/2024**



## **INTRODUCTION**

This Statement of Purpose sets out the aims, values, principles and the objectives of Durham County Council's Adoption Service which is a partner in Adopt Coast to Coast, a Regional Adoption Agency. DCC are partnered in the RAA with Together for Children who deliver children's services on behalf of Sunderland City Council.

Adopt Coast to Coast was launched on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021. Until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 Cumbria County Council were also partners within the RAA. This document will describe how the aims will be met in partnership with carers, children, young people, their families and other partner agencies. It also explains the facilities and services provided, which are delivered in accordance with adoption legislation and regulatory frameworks including:

- Children and Adoption Act 2006
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (revised 2011)
- The Adoption Minimum Standards 2014.
- Adopters Charter 2011
- The Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012
- Action Plan for Adoption Tackling Delay 2012.
- Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2013
- Children and Families Act 2014.

This document will be made available upon request for inspection by:

- any person working for the purposes of the Adoption Service.
- children who may be adopted, their birth parents and guardians.
- person wishing to adopt a child.
- adopted persons, their parents, natural parents and former guardians.

The Statement of Purpose will be reviewed at least annually and amended as necessary. It will also be updated to accommodate changes in legislation, practice, policies and priorities as required.

Within 28 days of any amendment the Adoption Statement of Purpose must be sent to the Chief Inspector of OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) and published on the provider's website.

Durham County Council places great emphasis on working with children and their families/carers to promote and maintain stability, safety and security for children. Children have a right to a family life where they can be claimed as family members, form and maintain effective relationships, fulfil their potential and achieve their potential within a loving, caring and positive environment.

Those children who need to be Looked After by the Local Authority are likely to be the most vulnerable and in need of help and support. They may have experienced neglect, abuse, trauma and disruption in their childhood and could have complex needs as a result of their experiences.

A primary consideration in meeting such a child's needs for permanence is, wherever possible, to maintain or return them to their family of origin, including extended family. However, where this can not be achieved an alternative permanent placement outside their birth family will be required. For some children their current and future needs will be best met through adoption.

The Adoption service adheres to the Children and Young People's Service - Principles of Best Practice "Every conversation matters, every day counts"

We are:

- **People focused**
- **We value, trust and support each other**
- **Empowering**
- **Outcome focused**
- **We work together to achieve the best for people**

We want the very best for all of our children. We want every child to be safe, have the best start in life, good health and access to good, quality education, training and employment. We strive to be a good corporate parent when children are looked after in our care.

We will work with other agencies to deliver good outcomes for all children and young people through their childhood into adulthood and living independently.

We will ensure that we work in a timely manner acknowledging that childhood is precious and that everyday counts. We will work hard to ensure there is no delay for children and young people's plans as a result of our work. Where it is not possible for children to be brought up by their birth family and where children have a plan of adoption, we will seek a suitable, adoptive family without delay utilising all resources available to us.

We know that moving homes or schools can be hard for children and young people and can affect their progress and wellbeing. We will work hard to minimise moves for children and support smooth transitions. We will ensure that prospective adopters are trained, assessed and supported so that they recognise the impact of change and trauma on children. We will match children with prospective adopters who will meet their lifelong needs through their childhood and into adulthood. We will carefully plan introductions to ensure that these meet the needs of all parties.

## **We put people and communities at the heart of everything we do**

We will work with children, young people, families and each other with compassion and humility and in a context of high support, high challenge. We will endeavour to ensure everyone receives the right support at the right time.

We will ensure that we spend time with every child and young person so that we understand what life is like from their perspective, what 'good' looks like for them and to help prepare them for their next steps.

We will take responsibility for creating and maintaining effective relationships with children, young people, families and each other using language that everyone can understand. We will strive to provide consistency of workers as we know this is important in building trusting relationships. We will ensure wherever possible that children remain in contact with their birth family, siblings and other people who are important to them particularly foster carers.

## **We value, trust and support each other**

We will liaise with children, young people and families to ensure that we prepare them for the future and establish where vulnerabilities are so we can offer appropriate support. We will use an evidence-based approach to assessing need and managing risk recognising the support needs of families and putting plans in place where necessary to support those needs. We believe that children and young people should remain living in their families and local communities with support where it is safe to do so. Where this is not possible, we will endeavour to identify suitable prospective adopters for all children with a plan of adoption.

We will work with partners to make sure there is clarity in who makes decisions for and with children and young people and why these decisions are made. We will regularly review situations to ensure that decisions and support remain appropriate and ensure that we spend public money wisely.

We will be creative in finding the best way to support every individual child and adoptive family through the completion of an Assessment of Support Needs at the time of each match. This assessment will be reviewed at the request of the adoptive family to ensure flexible and responsive Post Adoption Support is available to achieve good outcomes.

## **Aims**

In addition, Durham County Council's Adoption Service aims to:

- Work in partnership to deliver the “hub and spoke” model for the Adopt Coast to Coast through collaboration in respect of its statutory adoption functions.
- Provide child-centred services
- Deliver a high-quality accessible service to adopters and potential adopters
- Ensure early permanence is considered and progressed where appropriate to minimise the number of moves for children, promoting positive attachments as early as possible
- Provide an accessible independent service for birth families affected by adoption
- Create strong partnership working with Local Authorities, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and universal services
- Offer a service which is high-quality and provides good value for money

### **Values and Principles**

Durham County Council's Adoption Service is committed to maintaining the values and principles in accordance with the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014.

There is commitment to work in a single RAA across the geographical area proposed, to achieve:

- A culture of early permanence planning in order to identify suitable adopters for children at the earliest possible stage during the care planning process to ensure the timeliness of the child moving in with their adoptive family.
- Marketing activity and recruitment of prospective adoptive families to meet the needs of the range of children, including sibling groups.
- Assessment and training of prospective adopters to a consistently high standard.
- Development of services across the range of adoption functions in the RAA through the capturing of stakeholder views and best regional and national practice.
- Matching, linking and adoption support that enables children to live in supportive and safe placements with their adoptive families.

- Pre and Post Adoption support tailored to meet the needs of the children and adoptive families and to deliver this as a consistent package of support across the RAA area.
- Effective and easily accessible Birth Family support.
- Access to consistent and responsive Intermediary Services.

## **Children**

Providing child-centred services through:

- Placing the child at the centre throughout their adoption journey, including into adulthood.
- Securing early permanence to prevent delay and achieve the best possible outcomes.
- Recognising the child's voice in permanence planning and ensuring communication is effective to enable them to understand their life narrative.
- Creating a sense of belonging for the child, in a secure permanent family and in the wider adoption community.
- Ensuring access to support at the level and time that it is needed.
- Ensuring sufficient adopters to promote the best possible match for the child.

## **Giving a high-quality accessible service to adopters and potential adopters through:**

- Ensuring applicants receive a sensitive, flexible and welcoming service.
- Responding to enquiries from potential adopters in a timely manner.
- Giving prospective adopters clear, realistic and timely feedback at all stages of their enquiry and application.
- Ensuring that adopters fully contribute to an evidence-based assessment, approval and matching process.
- Providing consistent quality of adoption support that is relevant to individual adopter family's needs.
- Identifying and progressing potential matches at the earliest possible stage.
- Providing qualified, skilled and experienced staff to support and guide adopters throughout their journey.
- Offering consistent, high quality, up to date training throughout, to enable adopters to understand the lifelong impact of adoption.

## **Providing an accessible independent service for birth families and others affected by adoption which will include:**

- Support for birth family members whose children have a plan of adoption and enabling them, at any point, to contribute to the child's understanding of their life story.
- A letterbox service to facilitate ongoing positive contact between birth families and children.
- Facilitation of direct contact where this meets the child's needs.

### **Commitment to Adopters**

As part of Adopt Coast to Coast Durham County Council's Adoption Service is committed to reflecting the spirit and intentions of the Adopters Charter 2011.

### **Children come first**

- Adoption is first and foremost a service for children who cannot live with their birth family. Children should be helped to understand what adoption means and be supported throughout the adoption journey.
- Adoption is a life-changing decision that affects the child, and his or her birth and adoptive families. It must be made with the child's best interests, wishes, feelings and needs at its heart and based on sound evidence and high-quality assessments.

### **Adoption agencies must:**

- Ensure that children are placed, with brothers and sisters wherever possible, within a timescale that is best for them and without unnecessary delay.
- Treat prospective adopters and adopters with openness, fairness and respect.
- Make prospective adopters' first point of contact informative and welcoming.
- Recruit prospective adopters who can meet all or most of the needs of children waiting for, or likely to need, adoption and signpost prospective adopters to other agencies if there is insufficient local demand.
- Explain to prospective adopters the needs and profiles of the children waiting to be adopted.
- Ensure preparation and training, the home study assessment, and approval process are explained and proceed efficiently.
- Regularly review progress on early linking and matching with prospective adopters being assessed and approved across the Adopt Coast to Coast geographical footprint. Link Maker is the chosen solution to achieve this.
- Provide adopters and prospective adopters with information, counselling and support, as and when needed, throughout the adoption journey.

- Provide prospective adopters with information about the Independent Review Mechanism.
- Work in partnership across Adopt Coast to Coast, and with other agencies and the Courts, to ensure that all decisions are timely and joined-up.

### **Adoptive parents must:**

- Be aware that adoption often brings challenges as well as joys,
- Be realistic about the needs of children awaiting adoption and accept that with support adopters may be able to consider adopting a child with a different profile to the child they originally envisaged.
- Make the most of opportunities to develop their parenting skills and seek support when needed at the earliest stage.
- Do all they can to enable their adopted child to feel loved, secure and to reach their potential.

### **Objectives of the Adoption Service**

The Adoption Service as a partner in Adopt Coast to Coast is committed to achieving best outcomes through the continual development and delivery of a range of high-quality services via the Regional Adoption Agency. The adoption service continues to operate at a local “spoke” level, under the day-to-day co-ordination of the Head of Service and implement the agreed joint plans, policies and strategies as approved by the Governance Board.

The Adoption Service’s key objectives are:

- To recruit, prepare and approve prospective adopters who can meet the needs of Looked After children who are to be placed for adoption and who can provide them with a home where the child will feel loved, safe and secure.
- Ensure that children are placed, with brothers and sisters wherever possible, within a timescale that is best for them and without unnecessary delay and are matched and placed with prospective adopters who can meet most, if not all, of their assessed needs.
- To ensure that children live with prospective adopters where they are loved, feel safe and are safe, where their physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted. Where they can enjoy their interests, develop confidence and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Where they are supported to achieve their educational potential and where the education and achievements of children is valued and promoted.
- To ensure that contact with birth parents, brothers and sisters, other members of the birth family and significant others is arranged and maintained when it is beneficial to the child.



- To ensure that children have clear and appropriate information about themselves, their birth parents and families, and life before their adoption.
- To support birth parents and birth families to take an active part in the planning and implementation of their child's adoption, wherever possible.
- To ensure that children and adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their adoption support needs and are provided with the services to meet those needs.
- To ensure that adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to their adoption, and where appropriate contact is facilitated between an adopted adult and their birth relatives if that is what both parties want.
- To ensure that the Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations/decisions in line with the over-riding objectives to promote the welfare of children throughout their lives.
- To ensure that children, prospective adopters and adopters are clear about the aims and objectives of the adoption service and what service and facilities it provides.
- To ensure that children's cultural and identity needs are met by promoting equality and diversity in the approach with all service users.
- To ensure that The Adoption Service as a partner in Adopt Coast to Coast is informed and developed in accordance with the views of children, young people, and their birth and adoptive families.
- To ensure that children and service users receive a service from staff, managers, volunteers, panel members and decision-makers who are carefully selected, trained, supported and managed to deliver an efficient and effective service
- To ensure that allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support of children, the person making the allegation, and at the same time support the person who is subject of the allegation.
- To ensure that records are clear, accurate, up to date and stored securely, and contribute to an understanding of a child's life.

## **ADOPTION SERVICES**

Adoption Services are provided to:

- Children and young people who are to be adopted
- Birth Parents of children being placed for adoption.
- Prospective and Approved Adopters including those who are seeking to adopt children from overseas
- Children and their adoptive families who require adoption support services
- Adopted adults and members of their birth families.

### **Number, relevant qualifications and experience of the staff employed by Durham County Council for the purposes of adoption work**

#### **Name and Address of Adoption Team Manager**

Barbara Arbon  
Durham County Council  
Adoption Service  
Ground Floor  
Spectrum 8  
Seaham  
County Durham  
SR7 7TT

Post Holder	Qualifications		Experience	
Team Manager (Full Time)	BA (Hons) in Social Work	2008	Middlesbrough Council - Residential Social Worker	2004-2008
	Aspiring Managers Course	2011		
	Post Qualifying award in Specialist Social Work	2012	Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council - Foster Care Support Worker, Fostering Service	2006-2008
	Practice Teachers Award	2014		
			Middlesbrough Council Assessment and Care Planning Team – Social Worker	2008-2012

			Middlesbrough Council Senior Social Worker, Family Placement Team.	2012-2013
			Middlesbrough Council Assistant Team Manager, Adoption	2013-2016
			-Team Manager supporting Newly Qualified and supporting Social Work workforce and Principal Social Worker	2016-2018
			-Assessment and Care planning Team Manager	2018 - 2020
			Middlesbrough Council -Child Looked After Team Manager	2020-2021
			Durham County Council -Adoption Team Manager	2021
Social Work Consultant (Full Time)	Diploma in Social Work Certificate in Practice Education	2004 2010	Durham County Council -Safeguarding Social Worker Northumberland County Council -Family Support Team Durham County Council -Pre-birth Team -Adoption Team Senior Practitioner,	2004 2010 2011 2012 2013

			Adoption Team Team Manager, Adoption Team Social Work Consultant	2014  2019
Social Work Consultant (Full Time) Currently covered by a temporary 6- month contract	BA (hons) Degree Social Work ASYE  Progression	2017  2018  2020	Durham County Council – Safeguarding Social Worker Adoption Social Worker Social Work Consultant	2017  2020  2023
Social Worker (Full Time)	Diploma in Social Work PQ Award	2000  2014	North Tyneside Council -Residential Social Worker Durham County Council -Social Worker, LAC Team Social Worker, Care Leavers Team - Social Worker, Adoption - Senior Practitioner, Adoption - Social Worker, Adoption	2000   2002 2004 2004 2015  2019
Social Worker (30 hrs)	BA (Hons) in Social Work PQ1	2006 2008	Durham County Council -Social Worker Safeguarding -Social Worker, Adoption	2006  2014
Social Worker (18.5 hrs)	BSc (Hons) Sociology & Applied Social Studies with CQSW	1989	South Tyneside Council -Safeguarding Social Worker Gateshead Council -Safeguarding Social Worker South Tyneside Council -Safeguarding Social Worker	1989  1992 1996 1999

			Durham County Council -Safeguarding & Children with	2000
			-Social Worker Adoption Team	2002
Social Worker (18.5 hrs)	Teaching Certificate BSc Hons degree Combined studies Psychology major  CQSW PQ Award	1977 1997 1981 2005	Durham County Council -Social Worker, Generic Team -Social Worker, Safeguarding -Social Worker, Young People with Disabilities Social Worker, Child Guidance -STEPS, The Full Circle - Social Worker, Adoption	1981  1989 1991 1993 1995 2005
Social Worker (Full time)	Vacant – currently covered by agency worker			2023
Social Worker (Full time)	Diploma in Social Work  PQ1  BSC Specialist Social Work with Children, Young People, Their Families and Carers	2005  2007  2010	Community Service (New Horizons) Trainee Care Assistant North Tyneside Council (NTC) Care Assistant  NTC Residential Child Care Officer @ Addison Street (Part time from 1997). NTC Co-Ordinator Family Based Short Break Care (Part time)  NTC Short Break Care for Disabled Children – Full time Social Worker	1982- 1983 1983-1987  1987-2005  1997-2005  2005-2014

			NTC Fostering & Adoption – Social Worker	2014 - 2018
			NTC Adopt North East – Social Worker	2018 - 2020
			Durham County Council Adoption Team – Social Worker	Sept 2020
Social Worker (Full-time)	PG DipSW with Merit (Step Up to Social Work)	2016-2017	Gateshead Looked After Children’s Team -Social Worker (ASYE)	2017-2018
			North Tyneside Council - Adopt North East Social Worker	2018-2021
			Durham County Council – Adoption Team Social Worker	2021
Social Worker (Full Time)	MA (Distinction) Northumbria University	2012.	Social Worker – Initial Response Service -Newcastle	2012-2016
			North Tyneside Council – Adopt North East Adoption Social Worker	2016 - 2018
			Durham County Council Adoption Team -Social Worker	2018-2020
			Durham County Council Adoption Team - Interim Team Manager	Sept 2020 to March 2021

			Durham County Council Adoption Team -Social Worker	March 2021
Social worker. ( Full Time)	BSC Northumbria university.  Senior social worker progression completed with Durham Council in 2018  Practice educator Level one completed in 2022	2011	Prison substance misuse worker.  Social worker – South Tyneside, supporting and Strengthening families.  Social worker- South Tyneside- Contact and referral team.  Social worker- Kinship carers team.  Adoption social worker.	2011-2011  2011-2014  2014-  2016  2016-2022  2022-Present
Social Worker 26 Hours	BA hons Teesside University	2015	Personal Advisor Leaving Care Middlesbrough Council  Safeguarding and Assessment – Middlesbrough Council  Social Worker – Looked After Team – Middlesbrough Council  Care Planning and	Oct 2009 – May 2015  May 2015 – May 2018  June 2018 – Jan 2021  Jan

			Assessment – Darlington Council	2021 – Nov 2022
			Durham Council – Adoption social worker	Dec – 2022- ongoing
Social Worker (Full Time)	MA Anglia Ruskin University	2009	Social worker Children with Disabilities – Essex	2009- 2011
	NQSW (2 year post qualifying award/consolidation award) UEA. Kiera	2011	Social worker Children with Disabilities – Nottinghamshire (maternity leave in between 2012/2013)	2011- 2014
			Agency social worker - Children with Disabilities Doncaster (3 month post)	2014 – 2016
			Agency social worker –Child in care team – Derbyshire council.	2016 – 2016
			Agency social worker children’s safeguarding – Darlington	2016- 2017
			Agency social worker – child in care team Darlington (moved to CIC due to being pregnant)	2017 – 2019
			Agency social worker, stepped up to Assistant Team	2019 – 2019



			Manager then Team Manager (all agency) Children in care team.	
			Agency Social worker – assessment team Darlington.	2019 – 2019
			Agency social worker – children with disabilities Redcar	2019-2020
			Agency senior practitioner CP/CIN team York City Council	2020-2021
			Agency senior practitioner – CP/CIN team – Middlesbrough Council	2021-2023
			Agency social worker – adoption Durham Council	2022-2023
			Full time social worker adoption Durham Council.	2023 - Current
Social Worker (18.5 hours)	BA (Hons) Social Work –  Practice Educators Award Level 1 –	2013  2019	Middlesbrough Council, Fostering Social Worker  Durham County Council, Adoption Social Worker	2013 – 2021 –  2021 –
Adoption Support worker(Full Time)	NVQ Level 2 Safeguarding Children and Young People  NVQ Level 2	2010  2011	Durham County Council, Family Support Worker on Child Protection Team (Full Time)	2015

	Teaching Assistant  City and Guilds Level 4 Intense Support for families with multiple and complex needs	2018	DCC Family Support Worker on Families First Teams Consett and Durham West (Full Time)  Adoption Support Worker (Full Time)	2018       2021 - Present
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All Social Workers are registered with Social Work England.

The Adoption Team are supported by a generic Business Support Team who offer all administrative support to the Adoption Team and co-located Fostering Teams.

### **Adopt Coast to Coast Governance Arrangements**

#### **Governance Arrangements**

The Head of Service is accountable through a matrix management arrangement for the performance, service improvements and delivery of the agreed outcomes across the 2 spokes as detailed under the partnership arrangements. As lead for quality assurance across all aspects of adoption practice the Head of Service will ensure the development of consistent practice to a set of agreed standards.

The Head of Service is accountable to the Governance Board and this accountability will be monitored through the receipt of quarterly performance reports and bi-annual adoption reports on behalf of the RAA.

The Head of Service will provide whole system leadership, influencing, leading and oversight of resources, (for example interagency spend) to deliver improved outcomes for looked after children with a plan of adoption in the spokes.

The Head of Service will have a formal matrix management arrangement with the lead adoption person in each spoke and their line manager.

The Head of Service will have delegated authority to co-ordinate the activities of other Local Authority Officers who have identified responsibilities which support the partnership. The Head of Service through the Adoption Manager will hold these officers to account for the discharge of their roles and functions in relation to the partnership, as prescribed by the Governance Board.

## **The Governance Board**

The Governance Board will meet every 3 months (as a minimum) and membership will consist of:

- Directors of Children's Social Care or their nominated officers
- Head of Service
- Voluntary Adoption Agency representative

The Governance Board will develop strategy and set strategic direction for Adopt Coast to Coast as detailed above.

Local Authority Members have a key role in ensuring that the RAA delivers good outcomes for Children and Young People. Their involvement and oversight will be as follows:

- Lead Members will meet with the Governance Board bi-annually to receive an update on progress and outcomes.
- Lead Members will receive regular briefings from their Directors of Children's Services.
- Corporate Parenting Boards will receive updates on the progress and outcomes of the RAA.
- Scrutiny panels will have oversight of the RAA as appropriate.

The Local Authority Strategic Managers Meeting will be held 10 weekly and required membership is the strategic manager with responsibility for adoption.

The Adopt Coast to Coast Service Managers Meeting will be held on an 8 weekly basis and required membership is the service lead for adoption in both local authorities and the Communications and Marketing Manager. The meeting will be chaired by the Head of Service. Invitations will be extended to others for example, IT/Performance as per agenda.

The Adopt Coast to Coast Team Managers will meet on a 6 weekly basis and required membership are the Adoption Team Managers for both spokes and the Communications and Marketing Manager. The meeting will be chaired by the Head of Service. Invitations will be extended to others for example, Adoption Assistant Team Managers/Social Work Consultants, IT or Performance as per agenda.

On a 6 monthly basis the Strategic Managers will host a meeting with the Service Managers and Team Managers across Adopt Coast to Coast to review progress and discuss the priorities for the next 6 months.

The Head of Service will meet with the strategic leads for the VAA(s) who have successfully tendered for interagency providers on a minimum of a 6 monthly basis to facilitate open and frank conversations about the practice and requirements in supporting Adopt Coast to Coast.

## **Provision of Services for Children**

Durham County Council's Adoption Team as a spoke in Adopt Coast to Coast provides services for children under three broad headings. These are:

- **Information on adoption & support**
- **Recruitment and Preparation for an adoptive placement**
- **Family Finding and Placement**

The Adoption Service works closely with the child's social worker where a plan of adoption is appropriate. The child's social worker co-ordinates the child's care/adoption plan and provides support to the child in his/her placement. A team around the child will be in place and in addition to the child's Social Worker other professionals directly involved or working with the child and family may include: Looked After Nurse, Adoption Social Worker, The Full Circle, Looked After Children Education Services (Virtual School), CAMHS, Community Support or people with a significant relationship or contact with the child i.e. Birth Family members.

The Adoption Service provides advice and information to the child's Social Worker in relation to adoption processes, and good practice issues regarding aspects of the care plan e.g. family time.

## **Health**

Health care, health assessment and health promotion are provided through partnerships with NHS Trusts and Primary Care Trusts who provide primary care and community child health services. (Universal Services). Specialist Looked After Children Nurses are employed to facilitate health assessments, to monitor the quality of health reviews and promote the health of Looked After children and Children Placed for Adoption. The Nurses also offer consultation to adopters in order to support them in caring for children.

The Full Circle Therapeutic Service provides access to advice and consultation regarding the emotional and psychological well-being of Looked After children and young people. This includes access to a Consultant Clinical Child Psychologist, Therapeutic Workers and wider access to CAMHS Services when necessary. The Full Circle Therapeutic Service also provides dedicated support for adopted children, young people and their families. These services include provision of planned surgeries, individual consultations, attachment training and individual therapeutic work.

## **Education**

Education provision is planned and provided in partnership with schools. Where a child has emotional or behavioural difficulties or special educational needs, the service of Special Education Needs (SEND) Officers and/or Educational Psychologist will be provided.

The Looked After Children Education Service (Virtual School) is dedicated to supporting the education of Looked After children. It is a multi disciplinary team of Education Key Workers, Education Support Workers, Inclusion Officers and Education Psychologist who work closely with schools, parents/carers and social workers to promote educational achievement and to address barriers to learning, including attendance and exclusion.

Virtual School provides a direct support Service to children and young people to ensure they have access to a wide range of educational opportunities, advice and guidance to ensure they can fulfil their potential. Each school aged looked after child has an allocated Education Key Worker who facilitates their Personal Education Plan and subsequent reviews.

Pupil Premium Plus is additional funding for schools in England to raise the attainment of eligible pupils and narrow the attainment gap between them and their peers. Pupil Premium Plus is £1,900 per eligible child, per year. Looked After children and children adopted since December 2005 are eligible to this funding and school must account for how this is spent to benefit the educational attainment of the child.

## **Out of Office Hours Support**

Support is available through the Emergency Duty Team out of working hours where it is required, they can be contacted via Telephone on 03000 267979.

## **Children's Rights Officer**

The Adoption Service works proactively in partnership with Investing in Children. Contact details are included in the Children's Guide to Adoption.

### **Independent Support for Children**

Durham County Council has a service level agreement with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS), which is available to all children receiving a service.

NYAS is an independent organisation who can assist children and young people in a range of ways to ensure they are listened to and empowered. Information on NYAS is included in the Children's Guide.

### **Services for prospective and approved adopters.**

Services are provided to both Agency and Non-Agency Adopters.

Services for Agency prospective adopters are coordinated and met through the partnership with Cumbria County Council and Together for Children with the oversight of the Head of Service. The services are under the following main headings:

- Information and advice on adoption
- Information on the needs of children across the 3 Local Authorities and nationally requiring adoption placements and recruitment priorities to meet those needs
- Preparation via Group Training sessions and individual learning
- Assessment and Approval
- Compilation of Court Reports
- Individual support prior to and following approval, placement and adoption of children
- Annual Reviews of approval if a child has not been identified
- An annual training and development programme

The Adoption Service provides advice, information, assessments and support to domestic, non-agency and inter-country adopters.

### **Services for birth families**

The child's Social Worker/Permanence Team work with birth families throughout the adoption process.

Information, advice, counselling and support to birth parents is available from the Adoption Service.

The Adoption Service is committed to promoting the quality and choice of services provided to birth families.

The Adoption Service operates an Indirect Contact System 'postbox' to promote an ongoing exchange of information between birth families and adopted children. Guidance, advice and ongoing assistance (if required) is available to all parties to promote participation in these arrangements.

### **Services for adopted adults**

Durham County Council will provide advice and assistance to adults seeking access to information on their adoption.

This work, which includes Section 98 counselling to adults who were previously adopted, is undertaken by members of the Adoption Service.

### **Early Permanence - Concurrent Planning and Fostering for Adoption**

Durham County Council pursues early permanence planning arrangements where appropriate. The benefits are that young children experience fewer moves and are placed with their permanent family more quickly. This approach avoids the early attachment difficulties associated with instability of care and changes of primary care giver.

### **Regional Developments**

The Adoption Service remains a member of the North East Consortium of Adoption Agencies. The Consortium shares resources and practice developments to meet the diverse cultural needs of children where appropriate.

### **National Developments**

The Head of Service participates in the National RAA Leaders forums which supports the sharing of adoption practice and developments from across England. The RAA Leaders have strong links to the National Adoption Recruitment Campaign.

## **RECRUITMENT, ASSESSMENT, TRAINING AND APPROVAL OF PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS**

### **Recruitment**

The recruitment is managed by the hub through a dedicated Marketing and Communications Officer working closely with Communications leads in each of the spokes. The recruitment activity is supported by a new website, Facebook page and Instagram account. An online enquiry form has been developed for the website and the dedicated Adopt Coast to Coast telephone number will be answered by experienced call centre within Durham County Council. The performance and ongoing training needs will be monitored and met by the hub. The recruitment activity is supported by a dedicated year 1 budget and a recruitment strategy.

The recruitment activity will be influenced by management information on children, (numbers referred, gender, ages, groups of brothers and sisters, children's needs etc.) to inform, prioritise and target recruitment to meet the needs of children across Adopt Coast to Coast requiring adoption.

Information packs are available electronically via the website to provide advice to enquirers on a full range of adoption issues and support services which are available throughout the adoption journey.

Adopt Coast to Coast recognises the value in attracting applicants from diverse backgrounds. Advertising material and written information are designed to highlight children's needs for safe and stable parenting whilst emphasising that enquiries and applications are encouraged from people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

The marketing approach to adoption recruitment seeks to raise public awareness of the needs of children and the rewards and challenges of adoptive parenting. Recruitment activity and preparation groups will be coordinated regionally to maximise opportunities for prospective adopters to commence their journey with Adopt Coast to Coast.

With the support of the hub, Durham Adoption Service with Cumbria and Together for Children will hold regular information events and offer bookable appointments in addition to the opportunity to speak to a duty officer without a prior appointment. The information events are held virtually. These events will take place on different days (including weekends) and at different times (including evenings) to ensure they are accessible to as many people as possible. These events provide opportunities for enquirers to talk to experienced adoption social workers and adoptive parents.

### **Initial enquiry**

People who wish to enquire about adoption can access information from the website and then complete an online enquiry form. Once this is received an adoption social worker will contact the enquirer to begin to gather information. A decision will then be made by both parties whether or not to proceed with an initial visit. A registration of interest form will be sent to the enquirer to



complete. This does not have to be completed before an initial visit takes place.

## **Initial Visit**

Initial visits are undertaken to prospective adopter within 5 days of receipt of the enquiry subject to the availability of the enquirer. This is an exploratory session to enable a two-way sharing of information. The Team Manager then considers the prospective adopter's information in the registration of interest form once received, along with the initial visit record to decide on suitability to invite the enquirers to move into Stage 1 of their Adoption journey.

## **Stage 1**

### **Checks, References and Medicals**

The assessment of an adopter's suitability will take account of a range of safeguarding and vetting processes designed to protect children from harm, abuse or exploitation.

All adoptive applicants are required to provide proof of identity and to give written consent to a comprehensive range of enquiries, checks, reports and references being obtained by the Adoption Service from other organisations or individuals. The requirement for Enhanced DBS checks applies to all residents in the prospective adopters' household who are 16 years or over. Applicants are required to consent to medical information being provided following a medical examination.

### **Information Counselling and Preparation**

During Stage 1, prospective adopters are required to participate in a series of group preparation sessions where possible. The preparation sessions will be offered monthly; facilitated by Durham and Together for Children jointly. Topics included in the information, counselling, and preparation training programme are as follows:

- Why children need adoption
- Parenting/Adoptive Parenting Tasks
- Separation & Loss
- Attachment & Bonding
- Communicating with children
- Adoption Triangle
- Prospective adopter assessment process and requirements
- Role of the Adoption Panel & Applicants attendance
- Medical and background issues affecting children's development/behaviour.
- Managing behaviour

- Safe care & caring for an abused child
- Life story work and preparation of children for placement
- Case studies for approval and matching of children
- Introductions of child into Adoptive placement
- Contact issues
- Talking to a child about Adoption
- Post placement issues & Adoption support
- Legal requirements
- Early permanence
- Rights/needs of adopted adults-access to records.

The Groups are led by experienced Adoption Social Workers with the assistance of social work colleagues, other professionals and experienced adopters. The groups provide an opportunity for those attending to increase their knowledge and understanding of the lifelong implications of adoption for all involved.

Additional opportunities for learning are available following attendance at Preparation Groups. This is facilitated by meeting other adoptive parents, use of the Adoption team's resources includes a range of books/DVDs on childcare and adoption issues as well as access to the varied programme of training available to both adopters and foster carers.

Once all references and checks are received and the mandatory training is completed, the Team Manager will review the application and decide if the prospective adopter can proceed to Stage 2. If the applicants are suitable to proceed, they have up to 6 months from receiving the letter notifying them of this to return their completed Stage 2 agreement. If the Stage 2 agreement is not received within the 6 months deadline, the prospective adopters would have to start from Stage 1 should they wish to continue their interest in adopting.

If the prospective adopter is not suitable to proceed, they will receive a letter to this effect stating the Agency's reasons. There is no formal appeal at this stage, however Durham County Council's complaints process could be utilised.

### **Stage 2-Assessment & Approval of Prospective Adopters**

On receipt of the signed Stage 2 agreement, an Adoption Social Worker would be allocated. The completed assessment must be considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) within 4 months.

At the commencement of Stage 2, the prospective adopter will be given the opportunity to register with Link Maker and create a profile. This is not a

requirement; however, it more easily supports the practice for early linking and matching. The Adoption Social Worker will offer support and guidance.

Within stage 2 a mandatory 1-day therapeutic parenting training course is attended by prospective adopters.

Any prospective adopters who are considering early permanence as a route to adoption are invited to a 2-day mandatory training course.

Applicants are encouraged wherever possible/practicable to make their own written contribution to the assessment. Self-evaluation combined with professional evaluation and judgement is crucial to the assessment and decision-making process.

Completed assessments are presented to one of the Adoption Panels for a recommendation and the minutes of the Panel along with the assessment paperwork are considered by the ADM in coming to their decision.

Applicants are invited to attend the Adoption Panel and are informed verbally and in writing of the outcome of their application.

If the Panel recommendation is that the prospective adopter is not suitable to adopt a child, a 'qualifying determination' letter will be sent by the ADM. The applicant can request a review either by the Agency or the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). Full information on this and the decision-making process is available in the Adoption Team's Policies and Procedures.

## **ADOPTION PANELS**

Adoption panel is held twice per month. There are two panel chairs who alternate chairing throughout the year. Panel is constituted in accordance with regulatory requirements. The Panel make recommendations to the ADM who considers the information and reaches a decision. The ADM is a nominated Strategic Manager.

The principal role of the Adoption Panel is to make recommendations on:

- The suitability of prospective adopters
- The review of approval of waiting adopters
- The suitability of matches between identified children and approved adopters
- Adoption support arrangements

Following the implementation of the Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments Regulations 2012) the Adoption Panels no longer make recommendations about whether adoption is in the best interests of a child in all cases. However, the Adoption Panel still consider cases and make recommendations where the child's birth parents wish to relinquish their

child for adoption. However, where the child's parents are not prepared to consent, where care proceedings are on-going, or where the child has no parents, the decision must be made by the ADM.

In these circumstances the social worker in the Permanence Team (LAC 3) for a child requiring permanence via adoption will complete a Child Permanence Report (CPR). The CPR will provide information and assessment on the child's background, needs and contact plans with birth family members, as well as future matching, placement and future contact considerations.

This report will be presented to a Team Manager who has the role of Agency Adviser, who will write a report for the ADM with a recommendation regarding the plan. This report will also include advice/recommendations from the Legal Adviser and Medical Adviser. The Agency Decision Maker will then decide regarding the suitability of the plan of adoption.

Reviews of approved adopters, who do not have a child placed, will be conducted by the Agency on an annual basis. Where prospective adopters do not have a child placed, an update report may be presented to the Adoption Panel, if there has been a significant change in circumstance.

### **Matching children with Prospective Adopters**

Detailed matching reports are provided to the Adoption Panel, highlighting the matching considerations of children and the approved adopters. The Panel makes recommendations to the ADM, who will consider the Panel's recommendation in deciding on the appropriateness of the match.

### **Adoption Support Including Financial Support**

Adoption Support needs for a child, including financial support will be assessed at the point of identification and matching children with prospective adopters and an adoption support plan is prepared and agreed by the Prospective Adopters prior to being shared with Panel as part of the matching paperwork.

Post adoption support is provided and is considered once a child has moved in with their adopters. If deemed necessary by professionals or if requested by adopters pre the Adoption Order being granted an assessment of support needs can be completed. This will consider any potential therapeutic support the child may need. Therapeutic support can be sought at this stage via the adoption support fund. This assessment can be reviewed annually if requested by the adopters. The responsibility for post adoption therapeutic support assessment is retained by the Child's Agency for up to 3 years after the Adoption Order is granted. Should the Adoptive Family not live in the Local Authority area where the child was Looked After the responsibility transfers to the Local Authority where they live after the 3-year rule expires.

A means tested adoption support allowance can be requested by adopters. The Local Authority may provide an allowance for children who have additional needs should their adopters meet the threshold. This allowance is reviewed annually, with decision making being made at a strategic manager level.

## **Adoption Support Fund**

This is a money set aside by central government for the support of adoptive families. Where an adopted child has been assessed as in need of therapeutic support related to their adopted status the Local Authority can make an application to the Adoption Support Fund to finance therapeutic intervention. If the required funding exceeds £5000 annually in terms of therapy and £2500 in terms of special assessment, match funding from the local authority is required.

## **Specialist Advisors to the Adoption Panels**

### **Legal Adviser**

The Legal Adviser to Panel is not a member of Panel but is available to provide written or verbal advice to the Adoption Panel and the ADM.

Legal advice is also available to adoption staff and managers when required.

### **Medical Advisor**

There are 2 Medical Advisors to the Adoption Panels. They provide a summary of the applicant's health to inform the decision for suitability to be approved to adopt.

The Medical Advisor will evaluate birth parents' medical background information, where consent has been given, as well as the child's medical information and prospective adopter's medical information.

The Medical Advisor offers further individual discussion and advice to all prospective adopters during matching in relation to children or where appropriate

### **Education Advice**

Specialist education advice is available to the Panel from the Virtual School. The adviser/s are not members of the Panel.

## **Training and Conduct of Panel**

The Adoption Service has developed an Induction Programme and training for new Panel members. In addition, training events for all Panel members are arranged at least annually. Adoption Panel members contribute to identifying their individual training needs within their Annual Appraisals.

The Adoption Panels members and Senior Managers meet at Business Meetings which are held twice a year to discuss any relevant issues affecting the Panel and/or Service.

The Adoption Panels fulfil their responsibilities in relation to quality assurance and monitoring of adoption cases. Quality issues on cases presented are recorded in Panel minutes and are brought to the attention of the ADM for any action as required.

Information provided by Panel is considered by the Service in relation to the training and professional development needs of all staff involved with adoption cases.

The business of the Adoption Panels is reported within a half yearly report and within an Annual Report which is presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel.

## **NUMBERS OF ADOPTERS, CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION AND ADOPTION SUPPORT PROVIDED**

Adopt Coast to Coast on behalf of Durham County Council Adoption Team is committed to recruiting a range of adopters who will meet the needs of the children and young people who require adoption.

Prospective Adopters come from a wide variety of backgrounds and the hub aims to recruit carers from all cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. This enables Adopt Coast to Coast to match their prospective adopters with the specific identified needs of the children and young people requiring permanence via adoption.

Where prospective adopters cannot be found locally to meet the needs of children with a plan of adoption, adopters are sought countrywide through Linkmaker to ensure that children are placed with their forever family without delay.

## **ADOPTION SUPPORT**

Adoption support needs, including financial support will be assessed at the point of matching children with prospective adopters and at any time post adoption in line with legislative requirements.

A range of individual, group and financial support services are available to adopters to meet both their and the child's identified need for adoption support.

Adoption support assessments are allocated by the Team Manager to members of the team who will complete an Assessment of Support Needs prior to recommending services required and if necessary, signposting to other organisations.

Regular information and training events are available for adopters as they continue with their adoption journey.

Adopt Coast to Coast will support the spokes in organising local and regional social events for adoptive families. These events include adopted children and provide opportunities for informal support and networking and are very well received by adults and children alike.

## **MONITORING, QUALITY ASSURANCE AND COMPLAINTS AND OFSTED**

Durham County Council is committed to providing services that comply with National Regulations, Guidance and Standards. With partners in Adopt Coast to Coast the Head of Service will lead on monitoring and quality assurance as detailed earlier in the Adopt Coast to Coast Governance arrangements section. This will be enhanced by the following methods:

- Staff are provided with monthly supervision and an annual Professional Development Report where the quality of work and practice is monitored, and training and professional development needs are identified.
- Adoption Team Meetings are held on a monthly basis and provide opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of adoption systems, processes and practice issues.
- The Family Finders across the 2 spokes will work in partnership to ensure resources are used most effectively.
- Management information systems track children for whom adoption is planned, prospective adopter's assessments and availability.
- The hub will provide performance information focusing on recruitment across Adopt Coast to Coast.
- Performance Reports are produced monthly that includes information on key adoption data and are analysed by Durham's senior management and the Head of Service.
- Disruption Meetings are chaired by an Independent person and advice/recommendations are presented to the Adoption Team and Adoption Panels to inform both learning and future practice.
- Six monthly reports on the Service and an annual Panel report produced by the Independent Chairpersons are presented to the Corporate

Parenting Panel who take an active role in the overall monitoring and review of Adoption Services.

Adopt Coast to Coast aims to obtain service users' feedback during different stages of the adoption process. The Adoption Panel also monitor feedback from all who attended. This information is analysed and reported in the annual Adoption Team report.

## **Comments, Compliments and Complaints**

Durham County Council has established procedures and information leaflets in relation to any representation from service users. Additionally, information for the public on the Complaints procedure is available via the Durham County Council website.

<http://www.durham.gov.uk/media/1711/Childrens-Services---Compliments-Comments-Complaints/pdf/ComplimentsCommentsComplaintsChildrensServices.pdf>

Information on how to complain is also included in the Information Pack sent to all those who enquire about adoption.

Durham County Council maintains centralised records and management information in relation to corporate complaints and their outcome. Children and Young People's Services maintains centralised records in relation to statutory (social care) complaints and their outcome.

The Head of Service will report on these areas in the monthly Governance Board meetings and the bi-annual reports.

## **Ofsted**

Ofsted inspect and regulate services which care for children and young people. The aim of Ofsted is to promote improvement and value for money in the services they inspect and regulate, so that children and young people, parents and carers benefit.

The Ofsted inspection of Durham County Council's Children's Social Care Services was undertaken in May 2022. The Judgment being;

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families  
**Outstanding**

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection  
**Good**

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers **Good**



Overall effectiveness **Good**.

Ofsted publish results of inspections on their website at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

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