



Together for Children  
Adoption Sunderland  
NMS 25 Report 2021/22

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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 the placement of 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 placement 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 placement are the agency's paramount consideration.

Adopt Coast to Coast launched on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021. Cumbria County Council, 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 placement 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 placement and up to three years post Order.

After three 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 are provided with support services from ARC Adoption North East (ARC), this ensures 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. In the year 2021/22 this service has been provided for seven clients. Intermediary services have been provided to three people for the same period. This is an increase of four and reduction of two respectively on the previous reporting period.

Despite the national restrictions Social Workers within the team have provided Theraplay for three children. This is a significant achievement which demonstrates the commitment of the staff group to offering services to children and families most in need. pre and post placement. The therapeutic training across the staff group also includes DDP, therapeutic life story work and the Solihull Parenting programme. In this period, two staff 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 502 active post-box files. This is a small decrease (18) 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. However, a single team member has overall responsibility for overseeing, reviewing and developing the post-box Service within her responsibilities.

<b>Post Adoption Assessments</b>	<b>No completed</b>	<b>Within 6 weeks</b>	<b>Over 6 weeks</b>	<b>% completed in timescales*</b>
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%
*NB this 6-week timescale is set by TfC, as a measure of best practice				

The requests for post adoption support have increased significantly on the previous year's figures and could be attributed to the easing of COVID restrictions as well as children being back at school, parents being back at work and the families not having the focused time together that was experienced in the lock down periods and where we experienced a fall in requests for post adoption support.

Reviews of post adoption assessments are being included on LCS now so future reports will be 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 2022.

## **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 increased by 25 days to 241 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 35 days to 66. This is very positive performance.
- The number of days from Placement Order date to Date of Matching increased from 147 to 202 days. This increase is in part attributed to the impact of the Somerset Judgement which delayed matches for all children across England.
- The date of a child starting to be Looked After to the date of placement for Adoption increased from 406 to 462 days. This is a small increase on the previous year.

The practice within Together for Children continues to be child led and the slight reduction in Best Interests decisions are decreased from 25 to 29 are a result of other permanence options being in the best interests of children. Placement Orders are decreased by 10 to 32 due to the Somerset Judgement 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 Court delays following COVID.

**Adoptive family approvals:**

During the period 2021/22 a total of 26 prospective adopters were approved, an increase of six on the previous year. Six 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 20 approved prospective adopters who entered Stage 1, seven were completed within Stage 1 timescales, this is 35% which is a decrease on the previous year's 65%. For the seven prospective adopters who did not complete Stage 1 in statutory timescales, the delays were linked to DBS and medical timescales. Going forward practice will be amended to introduce an earlier progress check and consideration will be given to an automatic alert on LCS.

Of the above 26 approved, two prospective adopters Stage Two Assessments were not completed within the 4-month timescale. The reason for this for one of the adopters was due to further information needing to be explored as well as the availability of the adopters due to ill health of themselves as well as their families. The other 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.

In this period, 36 children were matched and placed an increase of seven on the previous year. The Somerset Judgement has had widespread impact across RAAs and the spokes in Adopt Coast to Coast. A number of children who had links were not able to proceed to matching panel until the outcome of the President of the Family Court's Judgement was released in April 2022. Plans are in place for those children whose matches have been delayed being matched and placed as soon as possible. 36 Adoption Orders were granted. This is an increase of eight on the previous year. Both the impact of the pandemic on the court's availability to list Adoption Order hearings and the Somerset Judgement have combined to cause delay in Adoption Hearings.

## **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 a national pandemic which required adaption to a new way of working. As 13 of the 30 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:

- £179 983.34 has been claimed from the ASF following 69 successful applications.
- Disruptions –

17/18 – 2, 18/19 – 0, 19/20 – 1, 20/21 – 0, 21/22 – 1

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 one disruption in this period. A disruption meeting was 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 placement. This is being 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**

We have extended the contract for the provision of Birth Family Support with ARC. The contract covers 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 and when national restrictions are lifted the support group for birth family members will recommence. 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 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, 46 birth family members were engaged with the service, of this number 39 were ongoing referrals for previous years. The activity reporting from ARC for the final quarter indicated 38 active cases, five ARC pursuing contact and three non-engagement. 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, a decrease of three on the previous reporting period.

## **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 September 2018. The agency received an overall 'good' judgement with an 'outstanding' judgement for leadership and management.

The two recommendations have been addressed.

## **14 COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS**

In the period 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022 there were no complaints relating to Together for Children Adoption Sunderland.

## **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 partners in 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 three spokes.

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

## **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 placements 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  
June 2022**