



Northumberland County Council

Families and Children Overview and Scrutiny 6th December 2018

The Annual Report of Northumberland County Council Adoption Service 2017-18

Report of the Executive Director of Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr

Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor Wayne Daley

Purpose of Report

To provide an overview of the Adoption Service 2017/18. In line with statutory guidance and regulation, all Adoption Services have to provide a report on the outcomes of the service.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 1) Members note the report and its content.
- 2) Members acknowledge the report and performance information in regard to the period April 2017 – March 2018.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the priorities regarding Living, Enjoying, Connecting and Thriving priorities included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021.

Key Issues

1. The implementation and developments of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) - Adopt North East.
2. The agency to continue to successfully operate on a day to day basis in line with the Adoption National Minimum Standards & Regulations and other relevant legislation.

Northumberland County Council
Family Placement Service
Annual Report of the Adoption Service
1st April 2017 – 31st March 2018

1. Introduction

This report provides an overview of the main developments relating to the adoption agency during the period 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018.

2. Ofsted Inspection

The service was previously inspected under the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework for ‘the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers’ which incorporates adoption services into the single framework inspection process. Adoption performance was a key judgement within the single inspection framework. Northumberland was inspected under this framework in January/February 2016. The outcome from this inspection is that Children’s Services within Northumberland requires improvement to be good. The judgement for adoption was good.

The full inspection report can be accessed at:

https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/local_authority_reports/northumberland/052_Single%20inspection%20of%20LA%20children's%20services%20and%20review%20of%20the%20LSCB%20as%20pdf.pdf

Going forward, the service will be inspected under the local authority children's service (ILACS) framework that was introduced in January 2018.

3. Adoption Scorecard

The set of adoption scorecards and performance tables covers a three year period that the Department for Education (DfE) measure each Local Authority's performance against. The three indicators are:

A1. Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted.

A2. Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family.

A3. Percentage of children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

In the measurement of average days between a child entering care and moving in with the adoptive family (A1), Northumberland’s performance for those children

adopted in 2017/18 stands at 552 days (2013/16 was 618) with this being slightly below the national average of 558 days. We are not yet meeting the ever challenging target set by the Department of Education (DfE) of 426 days.

In the measurement of days between obtaining the Placement Order, and placing the child with the adoptive family (A2), Northumberland's performance stands at 216 days (2013/16 was 208). The national average 3 year timescale is 226 days therefore Northumberland's performance is slightly better than the national figure. The latest target set by the DfE for 2013 - 16 is 121 days and this remains a challenge.

Government targets in relation to the timescales for adoption are similarly challenging in 2018. The target for A1 in 2013 – 16 is 426 days and the target for A2 is 121 days. This will continue to be a pressure for the local authority. It is known from the current cohort of children who have been placed for adoption that timescales in relation to both A1 and A2 are increasing. These figures will have a detrimental impact upon performance reporting for the next three years but are meeting the needs of specific children.

We continue to proactively family find for children despite the length of time a child has been 'waiting'. This is often due to the child being 'harder to place' due to a number of factors, for example, complex health needs, sibling groups, older children. This determination has proved successful for some children resulting in them being placed with adopters.

Timely decisions are made in regard to family finding for children when we need to explore options outside of the agency. If the agency does not have an approved adopter within its pool of adopters that can be appropriately matched to the child, external family finding is undertaken within the regional consortium, adoption publications and through 'Link Maker'. Linkmaker is a web based national family finding tool that enables agencies to share profiles of children and adopters securely and quickly. This has impacted positively on securing families for our children in a timely way and is effective. We have successfully placed children with adopters from outside of the agency. The national adoption register is also used.

The percentage of children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family over this reporting timeframe is 41%. The national figure is 53%.

Information about the age of children when placed for adoption in this timeframe:

- 5 children aged 5 years and over
- 7 children aged 4 years to 4 years 11 months
- 2 children aged 3 years to 3 years 11 months
- 2 children aged 2 years to 2 years 11 months
- 9 children aged 1 year to 1 year 11 months
- 8 children under 11 months old
- 7 Sibling groups of 2 children have been placed together during this time period
- 2 children joined a sibling already in placement with adopters.

4. Adoption Panels

Adoption Panels continue to have a crucial role in the approval of prospective adopters and matching children with adopters. The panel meets at least once a month and has an independent chairperson who has significant knowledge and experience of adoption issues. The panel advisor, panel chair and panel members all play a key role in the quality assurance of all documents that are presented to panel.

During this time frame, 17 prospective adopters have been assessed and approved and 36 children have been matched and placed with adopters.

5. Agency Decision Makers

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM), during this timeframe was the Children's Service Director.

The agency continues to be fully compliant with the Adoption Regulations and National Minimum Standards (NMS) timescales in regard to panel minutes, recommendations and 'should be placed for adoption' (SHOBPA) decisions. The ADM has been provided with all adoption panel papers within the appropriate timeframe and received the final panel minutes to enable them to make a decision. The ADM provides any feedback to panels via the agency advisor.

SHOBPA decisions and Adoption Order Figures for the last 3 years are:

	SHOBPA decision by ADM	Number of Placement Orders granted	Placed for adoption	Adoption Orders
2015/16	36	30	36	38
2016/17	44	32	25	34
2017/18	41	34	33	29

Placement of Children Information 2017/18

	Number of Children
Placed with NCC approved adopters	25
Adopted by foster carer	1
Inter Agency Placements	7
Total	33

Two children have been placed in early permanence placements.

A sibling group of 2 children had an adoption disruption during this timeframe. Lessons learnt from this has been considered with these been put in to practice to improve and develop practice and processes.

6. Recruitment of Prospective Adopters

The recruitment and retention of adopters is a priority for the service in ensuring that we have the right families for children that have an adoption plan. The Family Placement Service has a Recruitment and Marketing Strategy. The aim of this strategy is to recruit adoptive parents living in and within reasonable travelling distance of Northumberland who have the skills and qualities to meet the diverse needs of children in our care.

The strategies for recruiting adopters is based on an analysis of practice information including current and emerging areas of need in terms of our children & young people. Recruitment is targeted across the county.

During this reporting time frame the local authority has sold 3 adopters to other local authorities - this relates to 4 placements.

Recruiting adopters is an on-going, year round campaign, with focus at particular time periods e.g. National Adoption Week. These opportunities provide extra support from the press and social media elements of the campaign. The recruitment of adopters, nationally, is a challenge with the number of approved adopters having reduced with the number of children needing an adoptive family being significantly higher.

Information Evenings are planned throughout the year and are bi-monthly. The NCC web page is kept up to date with information about the agency and provides detailed information about adoption for prospective applicants.

The agency continues working in partnership with the North East Adoption Consortium. The purpose of this is to share performance information and good practice across the region.

7. Adoption Support

All children that are being matched with adopters have a comprehensive adoption support plan. This undergoes close scrutiny from the Adoption Support Services Adviser, Adoption Panel and the ADM. When appropriate, funding is made available to support children with more complex needs that require specialist services. If children are placed out of county, access to these services can be crucial in supporting and securing the placement.

A wide range of additional resources and providers have been sourced to provide the right service to adopters.

This includes:

- Help-U-Heal
- Six Specialist Services
- Child Psychiatry UK
- SCS Counselling and Therapy
- Kalmer Counselling
- Barnardo's Mosaic

- Tyne Therapies
- Time4You
- Adoption Matters
- PAC UK

These providers are funded by applications made to the ASF.

Staff within the team have been trained to deliver the 'Fostering Changes' course that is adapted to 'Adoption Changes'. This enables the staff to apply the principles of this course when supporting and advising adopters on a range of behaviour management techniques. This is made available to adopters pre and post order and adopters from other agencies, that have NCC children placed with them and live locally who can access the training.

The adoption agency offers all newly approved adopters a one year membership of Adoption UK. Membership includes the bi-monthly 'Adoption Today' magazine, use of their postal lending library and access to their online community. The service also offers access to Adoption UK buddy scheme and Parent Consultation Service.

The agency has submitted 67 applications (34 requests made in 2016/17) for support from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) with 65 of these having been successful. These applications are in relation to 84 children who have received the appropriate therapeutic intervention to support them and their family. 2 requests were deemed not to be in scope of the fund. The DfE have confirmed that funding will continue to be available until 2020.

Families in Northumberland have access to adoption support. Referrals for support include support to adopted adults, support to birth parents and requests by families for assessment of adoption support needs. The data for the period April 2017 to March 2018 is:

- 34 requests for support to adopted adults
- 27 requests for support to birth relatives
- 89 requests for assessment of adoption support

The agency has continued to see an increase in families requesting adoption support over the last 12 months.

The agency provides a counselling service for adults adopted before 1976 in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002. It also offers a support service to adults who were adopted since 1976 who are seeking information about their origins, and to birth relatives who wish to explore the possibility of making contact with adoptees.

A 'letterbox' contact facility is administered and monitored within the agency. This is a system that enables birth relatives and adoptive parents to stay in contact by exchanging written information. Direct contact between siblings and between adopted children and their birth families is supported on a case by case basis.

The agency has a service level agreement with PAC – UK. PAC – UK provides independent advice, support, and guidance to birth parents and other family members affected by adoption. This support is available to birth parents during legal proceedings once the plan for the child is identified as adoption. Birth parents can access this service at any time that they have been affected by adoption either via self-referral or a referral through the agency.

In line with the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005, those affected by adoption can seek an assessment of their support needs. The agency undertakes these specific assessments and will offer a range of support services in order to meet the identified needs or will act as a contact or signpost to other appropriate services. Children adopted from care can have on-going needs with families benefiting from post-adoption support known as the 'Adoption Passport'.

8. Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)

In 2015, the DfE published a paper, "[Regionalising Adoption](#)" which set out to address and rectify a number of challenges which the government has defined as follows:

- Inefficiencies in the delivery of adoption services in England: there are too many adoption agencies chasing a limited market and not utilising economies of scale.
- Matching of children: this process is taking too long and hard to place children are not being matched quickly enough.
- Recruitment concerns: while the numbers of adopters recruited recently has increased, concerns remain about the capability of some adopters to take on harder to place children.
- Adoption Support challenges: adoption support is still not being provided consistently or strategically with LAs not providing or purchasing provision of high enough quality to support the long term needs of adoptive families.

In order to address these challenges, the government suggested a coming together of networks of Local Authorities (LAs) and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) to form regionalised adoption services, utilising economies of scale, mutual learning and expertise.

In the North East, 5 Local Authorities (with support from 4 VAAs) have agreed to develop the RAA - 'Adopt North East'. The 5 LAs are Newcastle, Northumberland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Gateshead. The model agreed is a host authority with North Tyneside being identified as the host local authority. Various work streams have continued to operate and meet regularly that have undertaken various scoping exercises. These include, for example, financial, information technology, human resources, adopters journey. All these workstream report directly to the RAA Board.

The go live date for this arrangement is now December 2018.

9. Aims & Objectives 2017/18

The service will continue to successfully operate on a day to day basis in line with the Adoption National Minimum Standards & Regulations. One of the main and key areas will be to support the implementation of the RAA to ensure smooth transition for the staff team, adopters and ultimately ensuring this has minimal impact on the outcome for children.

Until Adopt North East is in place the service will continue to operate in line with regulations and guidance and deliver against the overarching corporate parenting strategy and sufficiency plan. The Family Placement Service will be reconfigured post RAA as the Local Authority will still be responsible for a number of key elements in relation to adoption.

Adopt North East will bring together the best practices from each Local Authority and will aim to provide excellent adoption services that transform children's and families' lives.

Adopt North East will deliver the following services across the five Local Authority areas:

- Recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters
- Matching and placement – to match prospective adopters with children in need of adoption
- Post placement and post adoption order support
- Support and advice to all affected by adoption
- Develop and manage all forms of post adoption contact between adopted children and birth families
- Step parent adoption
- Inter-country adoption

IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	Northumberland Fostering and Adoption Services Manual Adoption Agency Statement of Purpose Corporate Parenting Strategy Other relevant legislation as detailed below
Finance and value for money:	The Family Placement Service has a budget that is closely monitored to ensure value for money in regard to the placements and provision it provides.
Legal:	Adoption National Minimum Standards and Regulations 2011 (England) The Adoption & Children Act 2002 Children Act 1989 and 2004 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 (England) The Adoption Support Services (Amendment) Regulations 2014 The above mentioned policies, procedures and guidance.
Procurement:	None
Human Resources:	None
Property:	None
Equalities: (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	
Risk Assessment:	This report is part of the Risk Management systems in place to check on the standards and service provision of children in adoptive placements.
Crime & Disorder:	None
Customer Considerations:	None
Carbon Reduction:	None
Wards:	None

Report Sign Off

Finance Officer	n/a
Monitoring Officer/Legal	n/a
Human Resources	n/a
Procurement	n/a
I.T.	n/a
Executive Director	CM
Portfolio Holder(s)	WD

Report Author: Liz Spaven, Senior Manager, Family Placements
(01670) 626262 liz.spaven@northumberland.gov.uk

FACS Scrutiny: 6th December 2018

Useful Links

- NCC Adoption Webpage
www.northumberland.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=1035
- Adoption National Minimum Standards
www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-national-minimum-standards
- NCC Virtual School for Looked After Children webpage
<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=12414>
- PAC – UK
www.pac-uk.org/
- Adoption UK
www.adoptionuk.org/
- First4adoption
www.first4adoption.org.uk/
- Ofsted's framework and guidance for inspecting local authority services for children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers
www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018