



**Durham County Council Adoption Service
Statement of Purpose
2019/2020**

Adopt with us



INTRODUCTION

This Statement of Purpose sets out the aims, values, principles and the objectives of Durham County Council Adoption Service and describes how these will be met in partnership with carers, children, young people, their families and other partner agencies. It also explains the facilities and services of the Adoption Service, 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 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 every day 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 placements 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 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 discuss 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 adopt 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:

- Ensure that "Children Come First" and are always at the centre of all our work.
- Be the best, approachable, professional and supportive Adoption Agency.
- Be an Adoption Agency that people choose.
- Meet the life long and diverse needs and achieve best outcomes for children and families affected by adoption
- Promote and provide a robust post adoption support service for all affected by adoption
- Continually develop and deliver high quality services.

- Work in partnership with other statutory agencies, Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Support Agencies
- Value and celebrate the diversity, differences and background of our potential adopters.
- Be respectful, flexible, honest and transparent in the manner we work with prospective adopters, children and young people, and professionals from partner agencies.
- Maximise use of technology and social media to enable us to be competitive in the changing face of adoption work.

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.

Children

- The child's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of the adoption process.
- Delays should be avoided as they can have a severe impact on the health and development of the children waiting to be adopted.
- Adopted children should have an enjoyable childhood, and benefit from excellent parenting and education, enjoying a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills leading to a successful adult life.
- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family that can meet their developmental needs during childhood and beyond.
- Children's wishes and feelings will be valued and fully considered in all stages of the adoption process.
- A sense of identity is important to a child's well-being. To help children develop this, their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language and sexuality need to be properly recognised and positively valued and promoted.
- The individual needs of disabled children and children with complex needs will be fully recognised in their plan for adoption.
- Children, birth parents/guardians and their families and adoptive parents will be valued and respected.
- A genuine partnership between all those involved in adoption is essential in delivering the best outcomes for children; this includes the Government, local government, other statutory agencies, Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Support Agencies.

Adopted adults and birth relatives

- Adoption is an evolving life-long process for all those involved - adopted adults, and birth and adoptive relatives. The fundamental

issues raised by adoption may reverberate and resurface at different times and stages throughout an individual's life.

- Adopted adults should have access to information and services to enable them to address adoption related matters throughout their life.
- Agencies have a duty to provide services that consider the welfare of all parties involved and should consider the implications of decisions and actions for everyone involved.
- Agencies should seek to work in partnership with all parties involved, taking account of their views and wishes in decision-making.
- Agencies should acknowledge differences in people's circumstances and establish policies that provide non-discriminatory services.
- Adopted adults should have their adoptive identity safeguarded and the right to decide whether to be involved in contact or communication with birth family members.

Commitment to Adopters

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 siblings 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.
- Approach adopter recruitment in the spirit of inclusiveness with a view to identifying potential and opportunity – no-one should be automatically excluded.
- 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 matching with prospective adopters, and where a match cannot be found locally inform waiting adopters about 'Linkmaker'- an independent organisation where children who have a plan of adoption are featured nationally
- 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, 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 is committed to achieving best outcomes through the continual development and delivery of a range of high-quality services via a combination of 'in-house' provision and in partnership with other agencies.

The Adoption Service's key objectives are:

- To recruit, prepare and approve prospective adopters who can meet most of 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 siblings 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, siblings, 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 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

Paula Gibbons
 Durham County Council
 Adoption Service
 Ground Floor
 Spectrum 8
 Seaham
 County Durham
 SR7 7TT

Post Holder	Qualifications		Experience	
Team Manager (Full Time)	Diploma in Social Work	1994	North Tyneside Council	
	BA (Hons) in Social Work Studies	1995	-Social Worker Family Placement Team	1994
	Practice Teachers Award	2001	-Senior Social Worker Family Placement Team	2002
	PQ1	2003	-Team Manager, Fostering Service	2003
	Postgraduate Certificate in Management Studies	2005	North Tyneside Council and Northumberland County Council	
			-Service Manager Jointly Commissioned Fostering Service	2011
			North Tyneside Council	
			-Service Manager, Fostering and Adoption	2011
			-Service Manager, Adoption Service	2018
			Adopt North East	
			-Family Finding Team Manager	2018
			Durham County Council	Nov
			-Adoption Team Manager	2019
Social Work Consultant (Full Time)	Diploma in Social Work	2004	Durham County Council	
	Certificate in Practice Education	2010	-Safeguarding Social Worker Northumberland County Council	2004
			-Family Support Team	2010
			Durham County Council	
			-Social Worker, Pre-birth Team	2011
			-Social Worker, Adoption	2012

			Team Senior Practitioner, Adoption Team Team Manager, Adoption Team Social Work Consultant, Adoption	2013 2014 2019
Social Work Consultant (Full Time, compressed hrs over 9 days)	Diploma in Social Work/MA Child Care Award Practice Teachers Award	1999 2004 2006	Sunderland Council -Safeguarding Social Worker Durham County Council -Social Worker, Safeguarding Social Worker then Senior Practitioner, Fostering -Team Manager (Temp), Fostering -Senior Practitioner, Initial Assessment Team -Safeguarding Team Manager Gateshead Council -Social Worker/Senior Practitioner, Adoption SWISS Independent Fostering Agency -Senior Practitioner, Fostering Hartlepool Council -Social Worker, Fostering Durham County Council - Senior Practitioner Adoption -Social Work Consultant, Adoption	1999 2000 2001 2006 2007 2007 2009 2014 2015 2016 2019
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 (Full Time)	CQSW PQ 1	1982 2003	Sunderland City Council -Social worker, Safeguarding Durham County Council - Social Worker, Fostering and Adoption -Social Worker, Adoption	1985 1998 2002
Social Worker (Full Time)	Diploma in Social Work Practice Teachers Award	2001 2005	Durham County Council -Social Worker Safeguarding, -Social Worker, Adoption	2001 2005
Social Worker (Full Time)	BA (Hons) in Social Work AYSE Progression/Consolidation Award Practice Teachers Award	2013 2015 2016 2019	Durham County Council - Social Worker, Adoption	2013
Social Worker (30 hrs)	BA (Hons) in Social Work	2006	Durham County Council -Social Worker Safeguarding -Social Worker, Adoption	2006 2014
Social Worker	BSc (Hons) Sociology &	1989	South Tyneside Council	

(18.5 hrs)	Applied Social Studies with CQSW		-Social Worker, Safeguarding Gateshead Council -Social Worker, Safeguarding South Tyneside Council -Social Worker, Safeguarding Durham County Council -Social Worker, Safeguarding & Children with Disabilities -Social Worker Fostering and Adoption North -Social Worker Adoption Team	1989 1992 1996 1999 2000 2002
Social Worker (18.5 hrs)	CQSW PQ Award	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 (18.5 hrs)	Diploma in Social Work BA (Hons) Social Policy and Social Work PQ Award	2003 2004 2007	Durham County Council -Social Worker, Kinship Foster Carer Service -Social Worker, Adoption	2004 2007
Social Worker (18.5 hrs)	Diploma in Social Work Child Care Award	1994 2000	Durham County Council -Social Worker, Children's Team -Social Worker, Fostering and Adoption -Social Worker, Adoption	1994 2000 2002
Social Worker (18.5 hrs)	Diploma in Social Work	1996	Sunderland City Council -Social Worker, Child Protection Durham County Council -Therapeutic Social Worker, STEPS/Full Circle -Social Worker, Looked After Children's Team Life story Coordinator, Adoption Team	1996 2000 2014 2014
Social Work Consultant (18.5 hrs)	Post is vacant			

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.

All Social Workers are registered with Social Work England.

Provision of Services for Children

Durham County Council's Adoption Team 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 prospective adopters are under the following main headings:

- Information and advice on adoption
- Information on the needs of children locally 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 or via ARC North East a local Voluntary Adoption Agency with whom Durham County Council Adoption Service has a Service Level Agreement.

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 or ARC as appropriate.

Life Story Co-ordinator

There is a Life Story Co-ordinator post based in the Adoption Service. The life story worker facilitates one to one meetings with prospective adopters prior to match including advice regarding life story work and later life letters. These are tools in explaining early childhood and family experiences to children, as well as the reasons why they cannot live with their birth families. Training is provided for professionals from social work teams, family support services, foster carers as well as adopters. One-to-one consultation sessions will be offered to key professionals and carers at different stages of the child's adoption journey as required.

Concurrent Planning and Fostering for Adoption

Durham County Council pursues Concurrent Planning and Fostering for Adoption 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.

Durham County Council are moving towards Regionalisation along with our partner Agencies Cumbria and Together for Children (Sunderland) with a provisional 'Go Live' date in 2020.

RECRUITMENT, ASSESSMENT, TRAINING AND APPROVAL OF PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

Recruitment

Durham County Council's Adoption Service has a dedicated contact within Marketing. This enables The Adoption Service to maximise marketing opportunities to recruit adopters. The recruitment of adopters is a key priority as set out in the Looked After Children Commissioning Strategy.

The Adoption Service utilises management information on children, (numbers referred, gender, ages, sibling groups, children's needs etc.) to inform, prioritise and target recruitment to meet the needs of children requiring adoption. Durham County Council's website has recently been redeveloped and includes information on Adoption Services and associated support services available to adopters, adopted adults and children. It also has an on-line registration of interest form and links to other relevant websites.

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

The Adoption Service 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. The timing of advertising is planned to facilitate a professional and speedy response to enquiries and is co-ordinated with planned preparation groups. Recruitment activity, preparation groups, assessments and the staffing required to facilitate a smooth transition for applicants through these processes are planned on annual basis.

The Adoption Service holds monthly information events at various locations across the county. These events take place on different days and at different times 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. If enquirers cannot access these events a one to one appointment with an adoption social worker can be arranged on a date and time to suit.

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.

Initial Visit

Initial visits are undertaken to prospective adopter within 2 weeks 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 considers the prospective adopter's information to decide whether they should be invited to submit a Registration of Interest Form. Once a Registration of Interest form is received and accepted the enquirers move into Stage 1 of the 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. 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
- Rights/needs of adopted adults-access to records
- Concurrent Planning and Fostering for Adoption

The Groups are led by an experienced trainer and 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.

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

There are two Adoption Panels which are constituted in accordance with regulatory requirements. The Panels make recommendations to the ADM who considers the information and reaches a decision. The ADM is a nominated Strategic Manager.

The principle 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) of a child requiring permanence via adoption will complete a Child Permanence Report (CPR) which will provide information and assessment on the child's background, needs and contact plans, as well as future matching, placement and 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, including financial support will be assessed at the point of identification and matching children with prospective adopters and a report 'Assessment of Support Needs' is prepared and agreed by the Prospective Adopters prior to being shared with Panel as part of the matching paperwork. This assessment of support needs can be updated at the request of the Adoptive Parents; responsibility for this 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.

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

A Medical Advisor is a full member of each of the Adoption Panels. This person has a responsibility equal to that of other members to take part in Panel considerations and contribute to reaching a recommendation.

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

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. The Adoption Team is constantly in the process of recruiting new adopters and has a clear Marketing Strategy to address this.

Adopters come from a wide variety of backgrounds and the Adoption Team aims to recruit carers from all cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. This enables the Adoption Team to match adopters with the specific identified needs of the children and young people.

Where approved adopters cannot be found locally or within the Northern area 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.

Between 1st April 2018 and 31st March 2019

- A total of 21 adoption households were approved
- 76 children were approved suitable for adoption with 49 children matched with adopters.
- 46 children received their adoption order

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.

The Service also has a Service Level Contract with ARC North East, to provide independent adoption support services to those affected by adoption.

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

The Adoption Service organises two social events per year in the summer and at Christmas 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.

The Adoption Service has well established systems for indirect contact and provides comprehensive support and written guidance to birth parents/families in establishing and maintaining indirect contact with their children. Birth parents/families are provided with accessible, consistent, and efficient support through the process of indirect contact by dedicated adoption support workers who manage all aspects of the Post Box systems.

MONITORING, QUALITY ASSURANCE AND COMPLAINTS AND OFSTED

Durham County Council is committed to providing services that comply with National Regulations, Guidance and Standards. Monitoring and quality assurance is undertaken 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 Adoption Team conducts weekly selection meetings to review the availability of adoption placements to meet the needs of children referred or approved for adoption.
- Management information systems track children for whom adoption is planned, prospective adopter's assessments and availability.
- Monthly performance information is produced for the Adoption Team with a focus on recruitment.
- Performance Reports are produced monthly that includes information on key adoption data are analysed by senior management.
- 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.

- Services which are provided by Service Level Agreements with partner Agencies are formally reviewed and take account of contractual requirements, objectives and quality issues.
- 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.

The Adoption Team 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.

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 September 2019. The Judgment for 'The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers', which Adoption is part of was graded Good.

Ofsted publish results of inspections on their website at www.ofsted.gov.uk

Address: Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate

Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

Telephone: 0300 123 1231