



Regional Adoption Agency

Annual Report 2019-20



November 2020



Gateshead Council



Newcastle City Council



Northumberland County Council



North Tyneside Council



South Tyneside Council

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
About Adopt North East	6
Background	6
Governance	8
Infographic:.....	8
Functions	9
Infographic.....	9
Responsibilities	10
Staffing, Organisational Structure and Service Profile	11
Staff Group	11
Organisational Chart	11
Infographic.....	12
Office Accommodation and Location	12
Infographic.....	12
Service Profile	13
Training	15
Adoption Panel	16
Web and Social Media Profile	17
Performance	18
Partner Ambitions for the Performance of the RAA	19
Feedback from Service Users	19
Selection of Quotes	19
One Journey with Adopt North East	20
Complaints	22
Infographic:.....	22
Feedback from Panel	24
Performance – Child Journey	25
Infographic:.....	25
Performance Data – Adopter Journey	30
Infographic:.....	30
Performance Data – Post Adoption Support	32

Inspection Findings	33
Adopt North East Performance and the National Picture	34
Finance	35
Improvement Plan and Priorities	36
Infographic:.....	36
Delivering the Vision: A Delivery Strategy based on Five Priorities for 2020-2023 ...	37
1. Recruit the right forever families for children needing adoption	37
2. Deliver a positive experience for those wanting to adopt	38
3. Provide effective help and care to adopters and those adopted	39
4. Develop a passionate, skilled group of specialist staff, committed to best practice	40
5. Meet the needs and ambitions of our partner Local Authorities	41
How we will know if the Delivering Strategy is working	42

Executive Summary

This report is the first Annual Report in relation to Adopt North East, the Regional Adoption Agency responsible for adoption services on behalf of Gateshead Council, Newcastle City Council, Northumberland County Council, North Tyneside Council and South Tyneside Council. Created in response to the legal requirement that the authorities regionalise their adoption services, the vision and ambition of the five partner Local Authorities is for Adopt North East to achieve '**excellent adoption services that transform children's and families lives for the better**'.

Since December 2018 Adopt North East has had responsibility for recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and intercountry adoptions and primary responsibility for family finding for all children with adoption plans from the five partner Local Authorities. Additionally, Adopt North East is responsible for providing support to all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives through the provision of Post Adoption Support and Post Box arrangements. Adopt North East presents a unique professional opportunity for its 50 or so staff to contribute to outcomes for children and families across five local authorities, from Haltwhistle to Hebburn, Bensham to Berwick.

This Report provides a summary of developments for the period 01 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, the first full operational year of Adopt North East. The report fulfils the statutory requirement that an annual report be produced.

During its first year of operation, Adopt North East has made significant strides to meet the needs and ambition of its partners, most significantly the successful formation and launch of the Agency and transfer of responsibilities whilst maintaining the full range of adoption services on behalf of the partners. The Agency also made tentative steps to build on and improve on the quality of adoption services that had been delivered before.

During the first full year of operation, between 01 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, Adopt North East:

- Commenced Family Finding for **143** children with plans of adoption

- Matched **87** children to adoptive families
- Supported **83** children to become subject to Adoption Orders
- Received **298** Contacts from prospective adopters
- Progressed **133** Enquiries from prospective adopters
- Started **101** Stage 1 assessments
- Completed **83** Stage 2 assessments
- Approved **78** adopters
- Supported **453** families with post-adoption support

The development of Adopt North East into an established, effective and transformative adoption agency is far from complete. The Agency has not yet fully realised the potential that regionalisation of services presents, but the benefits of more strategic commissioning of post-adoption support, the development of a strong regional adopter recruitment profile and the stabilisation of a passionate and committed staff group provide grounds for optimism. Inspection findings from two partner Local Authorities also provide assurance about the work of the Agency, with the March 2020 Inspection of North Tyneside Council noting:

The regional adoption agency (Adopt North East) is delivering positive and timely outcomes for children whose plan for permanence involves adoption. Prospective adopters are carefully and properly prepared. Prospective adopter reports provide clear and concise assessments of the prospective adopters' parenting capacity and their ability to provide the love, warmth, comfort and security that children need. Adopters who had experienced a particularly distressing and wholly unexpected adoption breakdown during the introductory process could not speak highly enough about the support they received from the adoption service, which has encouraged them to give adoption another go.

This report gives an overview of Adopt North East, its performance, its finances and significantly, the strategy it has to deliver the ambition of its partners - 'excellent adoption services that transform children's and families lives for the better'. Whilst fully delivering on this ambition will take more than a single year of operation, it is

nevertheless the case that for some service users of Adopt North East, excellence has already been achieved:

“The Adopt North East Social Worker made us feel very welcome from the start; she was very realistic and straightforward. We explained that we didn’t have a good experience with our previous Adoption Agency and that we felt really let down by them and lost trust. Anytime we asked questions, we didn’t receive positive responses and we didn’t feel supported. It got to a point where we needed to change Adoption Agencies or drop out completely; dropping out wasn’t an option... We felt so reassured by Adopt North East. Thank you Adopt North East. The process of assessment has been seamless and very impressive. The training has been great and it gave us back the confidence we had lost....”

(Adopters written feedback, 2020)

About Adopt North East

In accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, all local authorities have a duty to establish and maintain an adoption service in their area. Since 01 December 2018, Gateshead Council, Newcastle City Council, Northumberland County Council, North Tyneside Council and South Tyneside Council have delegated the functions of an adoption service to Adopt North East, a Regional Adoption Agency. Adopt North East is hosted by North Tyneside Council.

Background

The Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency was created in response to the legal requirement to do so, established by the Education and Adoption Act 2016. This requirement following perceived national concerns in 2015 about the delivery of adoption services, including:

- Inefficiencies based on too many adoption agencies chasing a limited market and not utilising economies of scale (In 2015 there were over 180

different adoption agencies, which dealt with around 5000 adopted children);

- Delays in matching of children (In 2015 around 3000 children nationally with adoption placement orders were still waiting for 'forever families' despite there being enough approved adopters across the country);
- Recruitment concerns particularly in relation to the ability of adopters to take on harder to place children;
- Adoption Support challenges (In 2015 there was concern that adoption support was not being provided consistently or strategically with local authorities not providing or purchasing provision of high enough quality to support the long term needs of adoptive families).

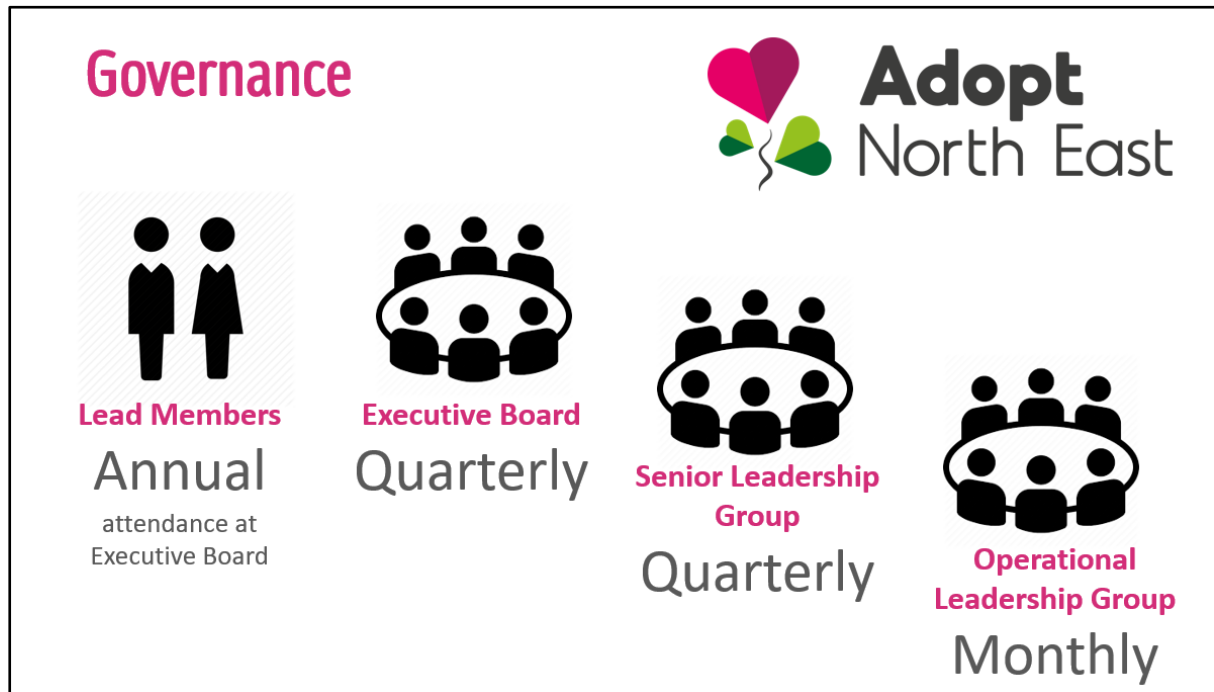
The Department for Education (DfE) response was the 2015 Paper 'Regionalising Adoption' and subsequent 'Adoption; A Vision for Change' published in March 2016 which required that by 2020 adoption services should no longer be delivered by individual Local Authorities but delivered on a regional basis.

Funding was made available from the Department for Education (DfE) as part of a national delivery programme. Newcastle City Council successfully bid on behalf of five Local Authorities – Newcastle, Gateshead, Northumberland, North Tyneside and South Tyneside – and secured funding to scope and define a proposed Regional Adoption Agency. A Project Board, Executive Board of the Directors of Children's Services and a number of workstreams worked to address financial analysis, operational modelling, ICT, host suitability and estates. The work was informed by regular, extensive stakeholder consultation.

The eventual proposal was submitted in the Summer of 2018 to all five Local Authority Councils for respective Cabinet agreement. The proposal was to combine the adoption services of the five Local Authorities to create a single Adoption Agency operating across the five geographical area to deliver the agreed vision of 'Excellent adoption services that transform children's and families lives for the better' hosted by North Tyneside Council. Cabinet approval was given by all partners and, on 01 December 2018, Adopt North East became operational.

Governance

Infographic



The five partner Local Authorities have joint responsibility for Adopt North East. The Agency benefits from robust governance arrangements provided by a tiered approach to scrutiny and challenge and the active participation of all five partners.

On an annual basis, the Lead Members for Children's Services of the five constituent Local Authority partners are invited to attend Executive Board. This meeting is facilitated and hosted by the Lead Member for North Tyneside Council. This meeting enables political overview, scrutiny and challenge.

The five Directors of Children's Services sit as the Executive Board of the Agency. The Executive Board meets quarterly. The Board is Chaired by the Director of North Tyneside Children's Services. The Board meetings are aligned with outturns for quarterly performance reporting periods for the Agency.

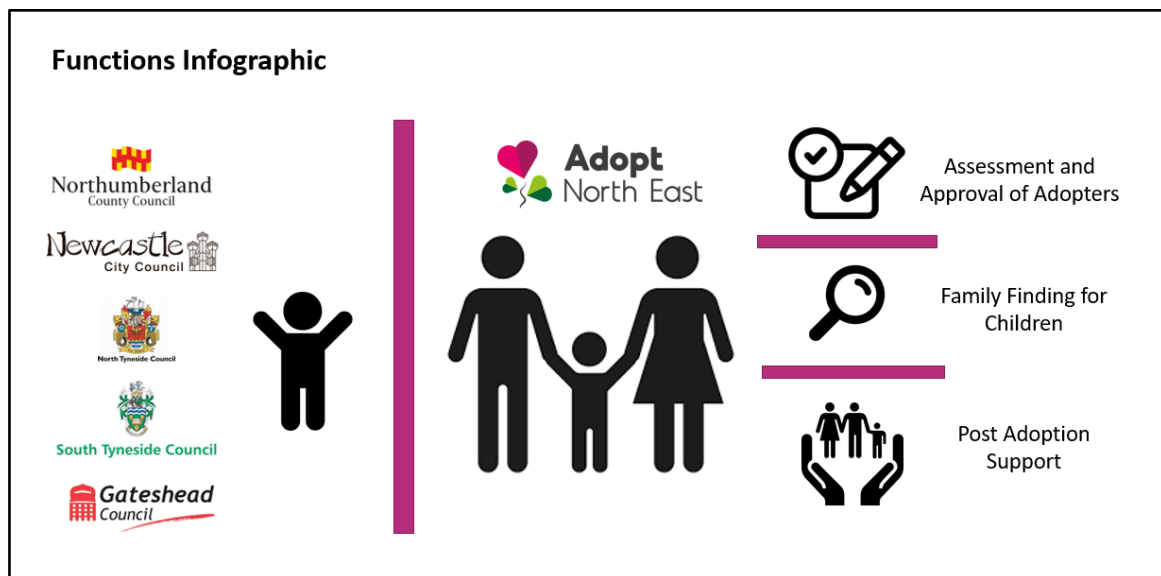
The Assistant Directors of the five partner Local Authorities sit as the Senior Leadership Group of Adopt North East. The Group is Chaired by the Assistant Director

of North Tyneside Children’s Services. The Group has met at varied frequencies to ensure the effective delivery of adoption services by the Agency.

Senior Managers from the five partner Local Authorities responsible for children with plans of permanency by way of adoption sit as the Operational Leadership Group. The Group meets monthly. This Group provides a regular forum for operational issues to be raised and shared across the partnership. There is a shared ownership of the agenda – this is reflected in the Chair being shared on a rota basis across all five partners.

Functions

Infographic



Adopt North East has responsibility for recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and intercountry adoptions.

Adopt North East has primary is responsible for family finding for all children with adoption plans but the five partner Local Authorities retain overall responsibility for children in their care.

Adopt North East provides support to all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives, through the provision of Post Adoption Support and Post Box arrangements.

Responsibilities

Responsibility	Adopt North East	Local Authority
RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT		
Marketing and Recruitment Strategy	✓	
Adopter Recruitment and Enquiries	✓	
Assessment of Prospective Adopters (Stage 1 & 2)	✓	
Completion of Prospective Adopter Reports (PAR)	✓	
Adoption Panel for Approvals	✓	
Agency Decision Maker for Approvals	✓	
PERMANENCY PLANNING		
Early identification of a child possibly requiring adoption		✓
Tracking and monitoring of children requiring adoption	✓	✓
Specialist assessments to inform permanency planning		✓
Preparing the child for adoption		✓
Preparation of the Child Permanence Report (CPR)		✓
Agency Decision – Should be Placed for Adoption (SBPFA)		✓
Application for Placement Order		✓
FAMILY FINDING		
Family finding	✓	
Distribution of PARs	✓	
Deciding on potential families		✓
MATCHING		
Adoption Panel – Matching	✓	
Agency Advisor	✓	
Agency Decision Maker - Matching		✓
PLACEMENT		
Ongoing direct work to prepare child prior to placement		✓
Looked After Child Adoption Reviews		✓
IRO monitoring of quality of child's care and care plan		✓
Organising child appreciation day	✓	

Post placement adoption support	✓	✓
Ongoing Life Story Work and preparation of Later Life Letter		✓
POST ADOPTION		
Support for Adopters to apply for Adoption Order	✓	✓
Post Adoption Training	✓	
Post Adoption Support	✓	
Post Adoption Support – Adoption Support Fund	✓	
Post Box Service	✓	
Access to Records	✓	
OTHER ADOPTION WORK		
Intercountry Adoption	✓	
Step-Parent Adoption	✓	

Staffing, Organisational Structure and Service Profile

Staff Group

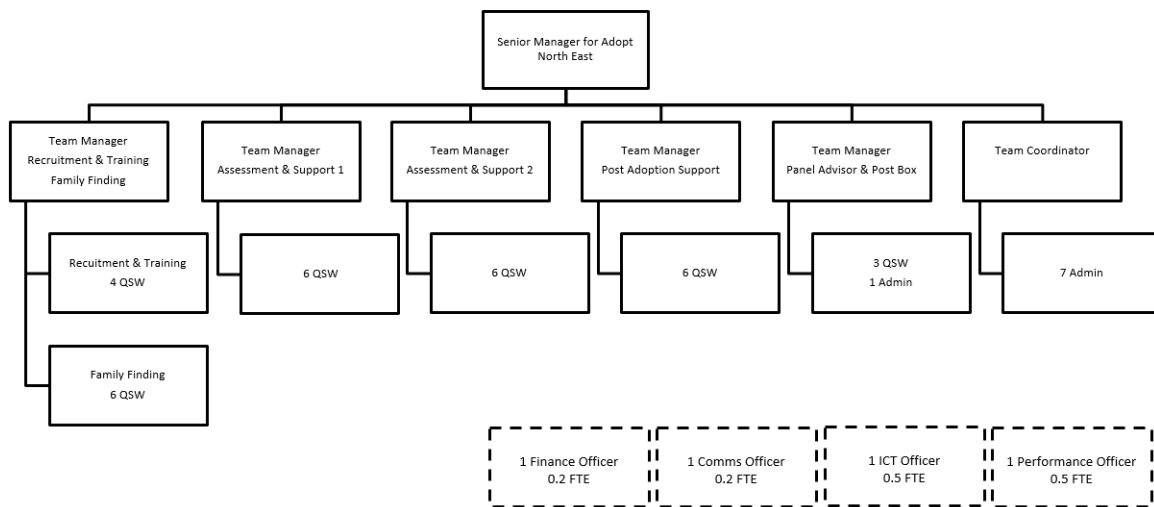
Adopt North East has a staff group of nearly 50, including 37 Qualified Social Workers. The Agency is currently split into 4 service specific delivery areas: Recruitment and Training, Assessment and Support, Family Finding and Post Adoption Support. The Teams are supported by a dedicated Administrative Support Team.

The seven Teams of Adopt North East are all managed by knowledgeable and experienced Team Managers. Additionally, a dedicated Team Manager acts as Agency Advisor to the Adoption Panel. The Agency is managed by a Senior Manager who also acts as the Agency Decision Maker. The Senior Manager is also part of the North Tyneside Council Children’s Services Senior Management Team.

All staff are employed directly by North Tyneside Council. From 01 December 2018, adoption staff from Newcastle City Council, Northumberland County Council, Gateshead Council and South Tyneside Council were formally transferred to the employment of North Tyneside Council, subject to the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE).

Organisational Chart

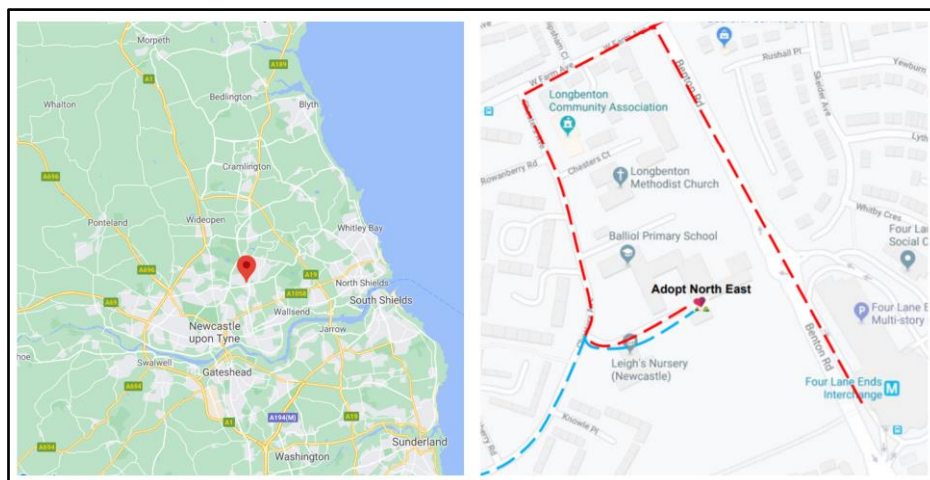
Infographic



The work of the staff team in Adopt North East is supported by specialists from North Tyneside Council, including ICT support for its Liquidlogic Case Management System, support with its financial management and support around Performance Management Information and Human Resources. Adopt North East also benefits from regular support from media and social media experts from North Tyneside Council to enable production of effective communications about Adopt North East, including regular targeted marketing and recruitment campaigns.

Office Accommodation and Location

Infographic



All Adopt North East Teams are based together, in modern office accommodation situated to the east of Newcastle City Centre at the Pembroke Wing, Balliol School, Longbenton, NE12 8QP. The offices include Team Rooms, Interview Rooms, Meeting Rooms, a Training Room and a room which is able to accommodate Adoption Panel. The service benefits from dedicated office accommodation not linked or used by North Tyneside Council Children's Safeguarding Services. The offices have access to car parking and are a 10-minute walk from the Four Lane Ends public transport interchange, which includes a Metro station, bus station and car parking.

Despite the quality of the office accommodation, all Adopt North East staff are aware of and committed to the need to undertake a high degree of mobile working, required because of the Agency's broad geographical area of responsibility, from south of the Tyne to the Scottish Borders.

Service Profile

Agile Working

Adopt North East uses the Liquidlogic Case Management System. This enables safe, secure and accessible case recording and robust Information Governance. All practitioners are issued with password protected laptops and smart phones to facilitate agile working.

Duty System

A central duty system is operated by Adopt North East. The Agency can be contacted by email, telephone or in person Monday to Thursday 8.30am – 5.00pm and 8.30am to 4.30pm on Friday. Recruitment and Training, Assessment and Support, Post Adoption Support and Post Box Teams all operate Duty Rotas staffed by qualified social workers and business support staff, overseen by Team Managers who have decision making authority.

Recruitment and Training Team

The Recruitment and Training Team are responsible for recruitment of Adopters by Adopt North East. Members of the Team participate a range of events raising awareness of the need for adopters for the children of the partner Local Authorities

requiring Adoption. The Team is responsible for delivery of the Agency's regular Adoption Information Evenings and Preparation Training for prospective adopters. The Team become involved at the point that an applicant registers an interest in becoming an adopter. An Initial Visit will be undertaken by a qualified Social Worker and, following this visit, a decision will be taken by the Agency whether to progress the application to Stage 1 of the Adoption process. This stage involves applicants participating in Preparation Training and the Agency carrying out statutory checks.

Assessment and Support Teams

The two Assessment and Support Teams are responsible for Stage 2 of the assessment process, the completion of the Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) and the presentation of the PAR to the Adopt North East Adoption Panel. The allocated Social Worker is also involved in supporting the adopters when a child is identified as a match, the decision to match, introductions and placement and their support continues until an Adoption Order is made for the child.

Family Finding Team

The Family Finding Team are responsible for finding adopters that match the needs of children with a plan for adoption, referred to Adopt North East by its five partner Local Authorities. The Team work closely with the children's Local Authority Social Worker to identify the best possible forever family for the child. The Team will look for adopters approved by Adopt North East and when none appear suitable, will liaise with the Local Authority for the child to look for approved adopters nationally, using the national Linkmaker portal.

Post Adoption Support Team

Adopt North East is committed to supporting adopted children and their new families. The Post Adoption Support Team offers a wide range of help and support including advice, practical support, emotional support, financial support and expert support. The Team's Social Workers also make the applications to the national Adoption Support Fund that funds therapeutic support to adoptive families. Support provided and accessed by the Team for children and adopters include:

- Individual support packages

- A Dedicated Social Worker acting as a point of contact for families needing support
- Help and advice for families needing specialist services
- Social events for adoptive families
- Additional training to meet the specific needs of new families
- Links to independent agencies offering post-adoption support
- Support to facilitate post adoption contact arrangements for adopters and birth family
- Adopters support groups
- Supporting waiting adopters' group
- Access to birth records for adopted adults

Post Box Team

During 2019, a dedicated Team was established by Adopt North East to deliver and safely manage ongoing contact between birth families and their adopted children. The Agency is committed to promoting contact so that so that adopted children to be aware of and understand their history. The Team work to ensure that written contact between birth families and adopted children is appropriate and that the link is maintained. This enables a child to know that their birth family has not forgotten about them and that they still care about their welfare and the progress they are making and that birth families are reassured that the child is safe and well.

Business Support

Adopt North East practitioners are supported by a team of dedicated administrators. Their work includes a full range of administrative tasks include telephony, minute taking, case recording and meeting organisation.

Training

During 2019/20 a range of training has been accessed by staff in Adopt North East to inform and strengthen practice. Accessed training includes:

- Induction and System Familiarity for new staff

- Information Governance
- Equality and Diversity
- Attachment Training
- Social Media Training and Post Adoption Contact
- Effective use of Linkmaker
- Assessment Training
- Containment Techniques
- Panel Training
- Early Permanence
- Cornerstone Virtual Reality training
- Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Secure Base Model Training

We are in the process of carrying out a skills gap analysis. This will inform the workforce development plan for the next two years to be in line with the service improvement plan. However, plans are already in place to provide training for staff in 2020/21 in Theraplay and Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) to work more effectively with families across the region.

Adoption Panel

The Members of the Adoption Panel of Adopt North East are as follows (the 'Central List'):

- 2 Independent Chairs
- 2 Independent Vice Chairs
- 6 Qualified Social Workers
- 5 Adoptive Parents
- 2 Adopted Persons
- 2 Foster Carers
- 1 Independent (Health Visitor)
- 1 Independent (Retired Solicitor)

The Agency continues to seek Panel Members to increase the diversity of Panel and would particularly welcome Members from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to better reflect the demography of the population it serves.

Four panels are held most months. Each panel may have up to six agenda items at any one meeting.

Papers are distributed electronically at least five working days before the Panel. Panels are minuted and these are noted to be of a consistently good standard. The Minutes are made available to the Chair within good time and circulated then to other panel members for agreement. The Chair is routinely informed of any amendments by other Members prior to the final minutes being signed off by the Chair.

Panel is very well supported by a Medical Advisor for applicant adopters and the five Medical Advisors for the children of the five Local Authority partners. Their expertise is extensive and invaluable to the decision making of Panel. Legal advice is provided for adopter approvals and upon request by Panel.

During the year, Adopt North East created a dedicated Panel Advisor post. The post is held by an experienced Team Manager.

Web and Social Media Profile

Adopt North East's Communication and Marketing Strategy is supported by experts from North Tyneside Council. The Strategy commits Adopt North East to communications which are:

- Open and honest – direct, truthful and factual.
- Timely – up to date and communicated regularly, consistently and quickly.
- Clear and concise – in plain English and jargon free – easily understood by all sectors of the community.
- Accessible – easy to access through appropriate media/channels.
- Relevant – targeted at the needs of the intended audience, appropriate informative and useful.
- Inclusive – all material designed to encourage and value discussion and feedback, with information available in other formats upon request

The stated aims of the Strategy are to:

- Raise the profile and brand recognition of Adopt North East
- Communicate the need for adopters, particularly for children from BAME communities, older children, sibling groups and those with additional needs
- Raise awareness of the continued and growing need for adopters and the profile of children waiting to be adopted.
- To contribute to the recruitment of adoptive parents to meet current and predicted demands

This strategy aims to target people:

- who live within a 90-minute journey of Adopt North East's hub. Adopters outside this area will be considered if they offer a home for children with particular needs.
- who are interested in adoption or who have expressed an interest in adoption previously
- who are interested in adopting children from BAME communities, older children, sibling groups and those with additional needs

During the year, media communications have included:

- Adopt North East Website
- Partner Local Authority Websites
- Social Media Content on Facebook and Instagram
- Regular press releases to promote Adopt North East
- Regular features/adverts in the residents' magazines of North Tyneside, Gateshead, Newcastle, Northumberland and South Tyneside
- Regular feature/advert in the internal comms briefings of North Tyneside, Gateshead, Newcastle, Northumberland and South Tyneside

Adopt North East's website may be found at:

<https://www.adoptnortheast.org.uk/>

Performance

Partner Ambitions for the Performance of the RAA

The vision and ambition of the five partner Local Authorities to the Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency is to achieve '***Excellent adoption services that transform children's and families lives for the better***'

In joining their adoption services together and forming a Regional Adoption Agencies the partners articulated the following benefits that they anticipated to be delivered:

- Improved timescales for adopter assessments
- Higher conversion rate from enquiry to approval of prospective adopters
- Wider diversity and choice of adoptive families
- More timely matching of approved adopters
- Improved timescales for placing children with their adoptive families
- Greater adopter engagement in service planning and delivery
- More extensive and consistent core offer re therapeutic training pre-placement and post placement/Adoption Order
- Support improved skills and confidence to enable field Social Workers to earlier identify children with potential adoption plans and more children placed in Early Permanence placements (Fostering for Adoption or concurrency).
- Improved performance measurement and management across the service

Feedback from Service Users

Adopt North East regularly captures the feedback of users of its services. This feedback provides both challenge and assurance about the quality of practice and the experience they have of services.

Selection of Quotes

Some of the feedback received during 2019/20:

- *Everyone we've met at Adopt North East has been **professional, helpful and genuinely keen to help us succeed.***
- *Just some feedback from our training the other week about foster to adopt. We really enjoyed the session it was **informative and thought provoking.** The Trainer kept us engaged throughout the session and really gave us an appropriate and realistic understanding about the process. **What was really clear for me about the Trainer is her passion for what she does***
- ***Without your support I really don't know how we would have coped.** Our adopted daughter is currently doing really good now and the whole house feels a much happier place to be. The attachment matters training which we have just completed is helping us to keep our daughter in her calm place. Thanks again for all your help so far and for the support we feel confident will continue to help us to be able to help our daughter grow into a strong and confident young girl*
- *The Adopter said before the assessment, she was worried and unsure about it. Since she met the Social Worker, she has been very **warm, understanding and approachable.** She has made the process very smooth. The Adopter explained that it wasn't easy because of some personal things they had to talk about regarding childhood and mental health problems but because of the person the Social Worker is, she helped her open up.*

One Journey with Adopt North East

One Adopter agreed to share their story about their journey with Adopt North East. A fuller version can be found on the Adopt North East website.

*Everyone we've met at Adopt North East has been **professional, helpful and genuinely keen to help us succeed.***

*The early training sessions were an overall explanation of the adoption process and **we were made to feel at ease from the very beginning.** There was no pressure and it felt like everyone in the room was in the same boat. Copious amounts of tea and biscuits helped make it feel less daunting.*

*The later sessions were heavy at times. Indeed, we found some of the topics harrowing and often uncomfortable. But they were necessary in order for us to understand a child's journey, and we believed this was **Adopt North East preparing us for any situation in the future.***

*We were very fortunate in that **we bonded with our social worker from the off. Efficient was her middle name.** We loved that she'd be wearing her jeans and would look relaxed as she chatted. She'd have a cuppa and a slice of cake during the sessions and this was really important for us, as it made us feel like she felt welcome in our home.*

*As for the assessments themselves, we found them cathartic. There's something about just talking about yourself that we both rather enjoyed. We were worried the sessions would be deep and intrusive, but **our social worker was gentle in her approach and we never felt pressured or uncomfortable.***

*Panel was the part we were most worried about. It's the biggie. It felt like we were putting ourselves out there and trying to sell 'us' to all of these people who held our future in their hands. We were nervous and scared on the day. There was double the amount of people we thought would be on the panel, and it felt like a sea of faces as we entered the room. **Our social worker was like our 'mam' – she was right there with us, to guide us and 'hold our hands'.** But I have no idea why we were so terrified – **every single person on that panel was lovely. Just so down-to-earth. The lady leading the meeting was truly the nicest –** she explained everything that was going to happen and made us feel completely at ease.*

Everyone introduced themselves and they were all very smiley. One person even said they'd sat where we were, so got how we were feeling and assured us it would be fine. We were asked around four questions and together, we felt like we answered them as honestly as we could. We were told there and then that we'd been approved, and it was like we'd won the lottery. It was pure elation.

It was only a matter of weeks after being at panel that we were offered a match. We couldn't believe it as we were expecting to wait months, if not

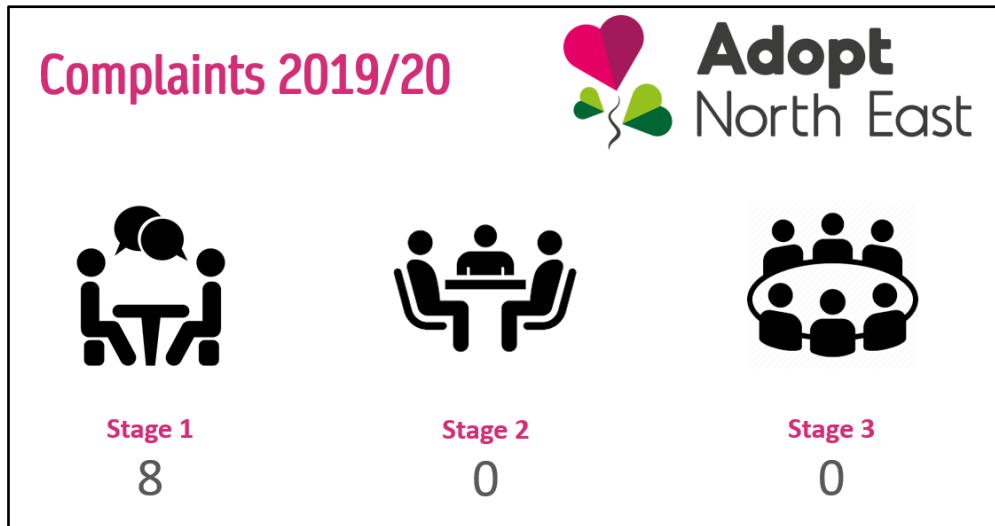
years... We were matched with an 8-month-old girl. Our social worker rang to ask if we'd be interested in knowing more. Initially, we were slightly dubious as we assumed we were done with sleepless nights but on the other hand, our son believed he was getting a 'baby sister'. Our social worker chatted us through her background and then gave us a document to read at our leisure which would tell us more about her life story. And then we saw her picture. Immediately, we knew she was 'ours'. The day we walked into the room and met our daughter, is a moment in time that will be etched ever so clearly in my mind until I die. We were stressed as we'd left in plenty of time, assuming we'd be early for the initial meeting but we hit traffic and were then late. But all that dissolved as soon as we saw her. She was sitting playing with a toy on the floor and looked up at us. We melted.

The foster carer was very friendly and over the week, was extremely helpful and guided us on her daily routine. The foster carer was also very accommodating and flexible – our agenda for the week wasn't set in stone. We worked it around what worked for us all, but in particular, our new baby girl.

*We won't sugar-coat it – after the initial 'dream' settling in, we had a period of about five weeks when she wouldn't sleep. We were on our knees with sleep deprivation. But we worked our way through it. And it got better. Now she sleeps really well. We're heading for terrible twos at the minute and we need eyes in the back of our heads! But you know what? She's thriving. Her speech is astounding. She's such a little character. She brings real joy (not so much at 2am, we have to admit). The way she believes we are her 'real' mammy and daddy just fills us with such emotion. **Because we are her mammy and daddy. Her forever mammy and daddy. And she's our daughter.***

Complaints

Infographic



As well as compliments, complaints are direct service-user feedback and accordingly, an important source of learning.

Adopt North East makes every effort where possible to deal with a concern informally. However, where no satisfactory resolution can be reached, complaints are investigated within the statutory process. Stage 1 Complaints are investigated by the Team Manager responsible for the management of the case. Stage 1 response letters are quality assured by the Senior Manager for Adopt North East. Stages 2 and 3 Complaints are managed by the Corporate Complaints Team with findings reported to the Senior Manager for Adopt North East and the Assistant Director of North Tyneside Council.

Complaints are a standing agenda item at the Adopt North East Management Group Meeting. This enables review and reflection and any relevant learning to be shared and taken forward as improvement work.

During the first year of operation, Adopt North East had 8 Stage 1 Complaints and no Stage 2 or Stage 3 Complaints.

The small overall number of complaints within the year is such that no meaningful patterns can be established, based on frequency and type of complaint or the distribution of complainants. However, complaints – irrespective of number – can and should inform service and practice development and improvement.

From a review of complaints received during the year, the following points of learning have been notes:

- Delays in responding to queries about Adoption Allowances
- Delays in processing Access to Records

- Insufficient communication and clarity about children placed for adoption being able to travel abroad

In all cases, following a letter of response to the complainant and the prompt resolution of the issue, Adopt North East sought to improve practice more generally to prevent similar future issues occurring.

Feedback from Panel

The documentation and work presented to the Adoption Panel provides a window on the standard and quality of adoption practice across the five partner local authorities and within Adopt North East. The Panel Advisor has a key role, with the Chair, in developing and improving the quality of practice.

In 2019/20 the following agreed learning from Panel has been:

- PARs are generally of good quality with sufficient to very good analysis of the information. The majority now reflect that there has been a thorough discussion with applicants about Fostering for Adoption and that the applicants frequently have attended the relevant training. This is a noticeable improvement in this period and reflects the training which was undertaken by panel members and the ANE teams in 2019.
- The quality of Child Permanence Reports is still varied. Currently they do not all reach a good enough standard.
- It is becoming accepted that CPRs should be updated before they come to Panel for a match but the impression is that although this may be done for panel, they are not necessarily updated for family finding even though it may be many months after the ADM decision.
- Adoption Permanency Reports are now consistently more detailed in respect of the child, the adopters and the proposed match. There is also more detail written about the family finding process and it appears to Panel that there is prompt discussion by Local Authorities with Adopt North East when a Placement Order is made, or expected to be made, this is an improvement in the last six months.

- The quality of Adoption Support Plans is the area in which Panel has seen the most improvement in the last six months. The improvement has been substantial and Panel is aware that there has been considerable work undertaken to improve their quality.

During 2019/20 there have been two applications for approval which have been deferred during this period and this has been the outcome after robust discussion by Panel members concluded that more information was necessary before making confident recommendations.

One application was not recommended for approval. The applicants exercised their statutory right and appealed to the IRM. In August 2020 (outside of the reporting period) the IRM recommended approval and the Agency Decision Maker approved the applicants as suitable to adopt.

Performance – Child Journey

Infographic:





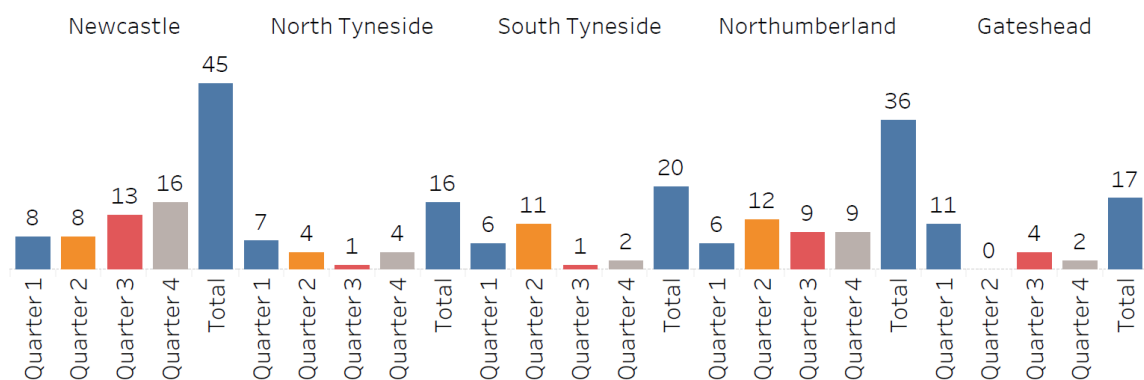
		Performance - High Level 2019/20					Adopt North East
		Northumberland County Council	Newcastle City Council	North Tyneside Council	South Tyneside Council	Gateshead Council	
Referred		36	45	16	20	17	134
Adopted		19	43	09	13	03	87
Supported		121	105	118	57	52	453
Inter-Agency		01	03	03	09	0	16

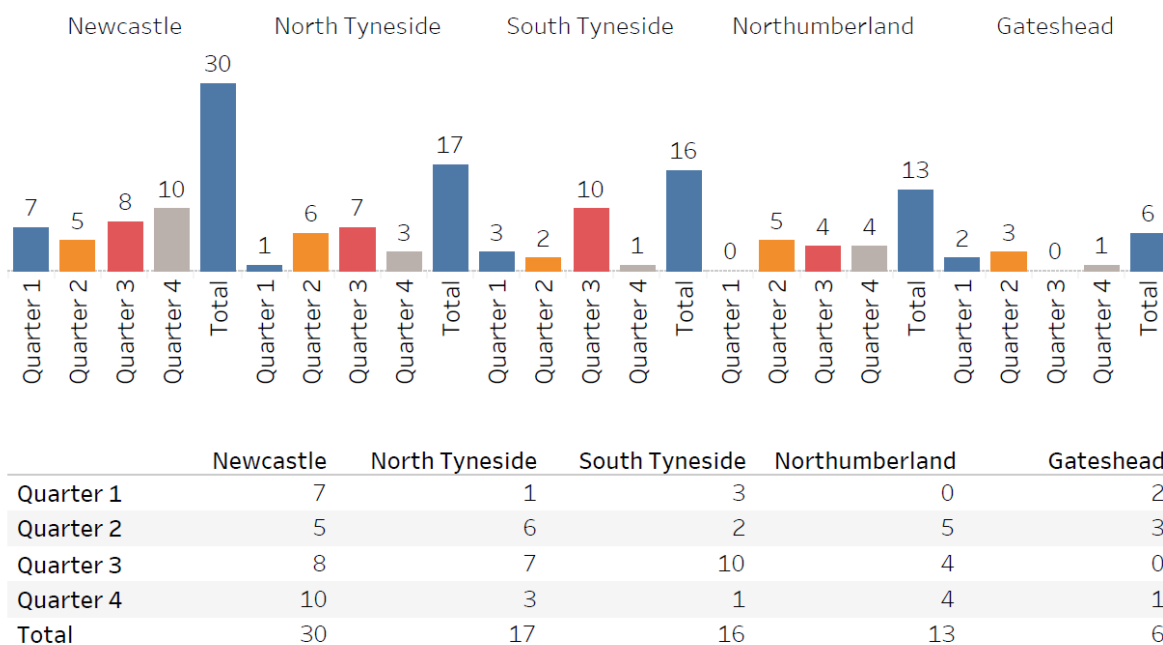
Table 1: The Number of Children with a Plan of Adoption referred by Partner LA in 2019/20



Commentary:

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 134 children were referred by the five partner Local Authorities. This was consistent with the work done in advance of the Regional Adoption Agency which projected 143 annual Adoption Orders granted across the partnership.

Table 2: The Number of Children made subject to an Adoption Order during 2019/20

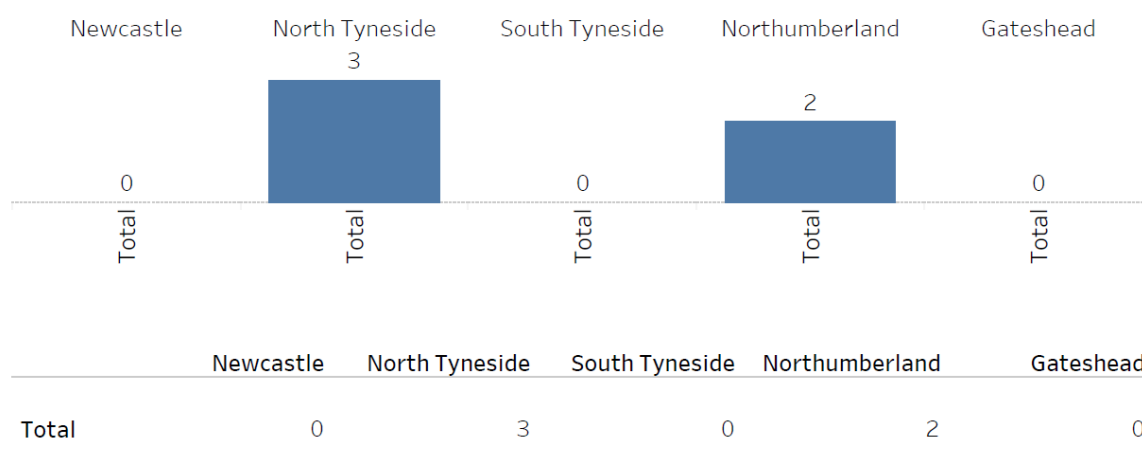


Commentary

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 82 children were made subject to Adoption Orders. This was below the number anticipated for the partnership, which projected 143 annual Adoption Orders granted. However, it was noted that this projection was based on a five-year average and in the last full year or pre-RAA activity, there were 107 Adoption Orders granted.

It is clear that the number of Adoption Orders secured is lower than that anticipated. As securing an Adoption Order for a child involves the close working between the Local Authority responsible for the child and Adopt North East, it is reasonable to conclude that the move of adoption services ‘out’ of the Local Authorities and into a separate entity may have impact the monitoring of progress to permanency and how this can be improved will be a key focus of Year 2.

Table 3: The number of children placed in Fostering for Adoption Placements by Partner LA in 2019/20

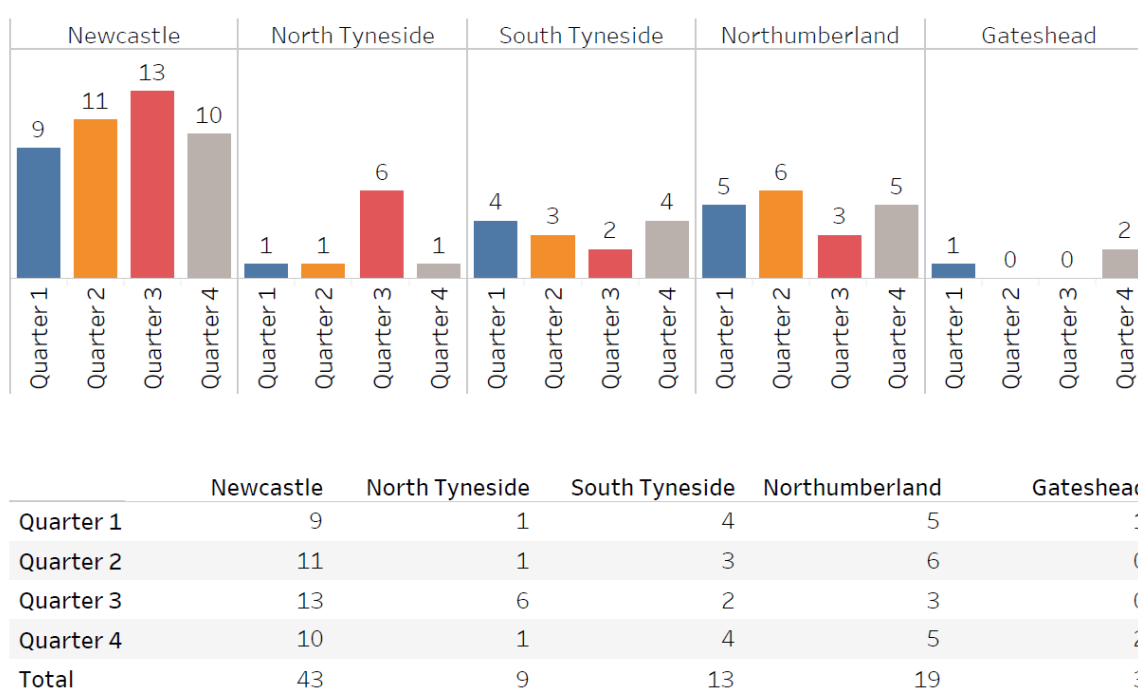


Commentary:

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 5 children were placed in Fostering for Adoption (FfA) placements. Whilst there was no projected annual number of FfA placements developed as part of the work done prior to the launch of the RAA, there was a stated expectation that Adopt North East would deliver ‘*wider diversity and choice of adoptive families*’ and therefore it can be inferred that it is expected that the RAA deliver an increased number of FfA carers.

It is noted however that increasing numbers of children with a plan of adoption placed in FfA Carers is not only dependent on the robust exploration of the suitability of prospective adopters to be considered for FfA placements by the RAA but also effective practice by its partner Local Authorities to track children in the early stages of their journey who may benefit from such placements. It is clear that the partnership needs to develop a more consistent approach to FfA placements to achieve greater use of this early permanence option in the best interests of children.

Table 4: The number of children matched to adopters by Partner LA in 2019/20



Commentary:

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 87 children were matched to adoptive families. After the challenges associated with establishing a Regional Adoption Agency by merging and transferring the adoption services and staff of its five partner Local Authorities, this represents strong initial performance and a firm foundation on which to build in Year 2. It is worth noting that in the months preceding the launch of the RAA, adoption services and the staff group within each Local Authority faced a level of uncertainty and instability which is likely to have impacted performance and therefore a number of children did not have possible matches or

were hard to place. Nevertheless, it is equally worth noting that Adopt North East will need to increase its family finding activity significantly in Year 2 to keep pace and meet the demand of the number of children being referred by its partner Local Authorities.

Table 5: The number and percentage of Inter-Agency Adoptions, Actual and Projected

Local Authority	5yr Average No. of Adoptions	Projected Inter-agency Adoptions	Projected % of Inter-agency Adoptions	Actual Number of Adoptions	Actual Number of Inter-agency Adoptions	Actual % of Inter-Agency Adoptions
Gateshead	27	5	19%	6	0	0%
Newcastle	41	3	7%	21	3	14%
Northumberland	19	5	26%	12	1	8%
North Tyneside	30	7	23%	18	3	17%
South Tyneside	26	6	23%	16	9	56%
	143	26	18%	73	16	22%

Commentary

All five partners placed children with adoption agencies other than their own prior to the formation of the Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency. During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 16 children were matched to adoptive families not assessed and approved by Adopt North East. Accordingly, 22% of children matched in 2019/20 were matched with the adopters of other agencies. This was less than the projected number with a five-year average of 26 children subject to inter-agency adoption across the partnership. However, as a proportion of the total number of children adopted during the first year of operation of Adopt North East, a slightly higher percentage (22%) were subject to interagency placements than anticipated (18%).

The use of adopters not assessed and approved by Adopt North East is and will continue to be a challenge for the Regional Adoption Agency and its partners. Such use means that in its first year of operation the Agency has been unable to place approximately 1 in five children referred to it with adopters it has recruited. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that prior to its inception, this was the case across the partnership and it is perhaps therefore not surprising that in Year 1 the Agency did not resolve this issue of sufficiency.

The reduction in the use of interagency placements will be one of the key indicators of the performance of the Agency and the success of regionalising the adoption services of its five partner Local Authorities. It will be a key focus for Year 2 and undoubtedly Year 3.

Performance Data – Adopter Journey

Infographic:

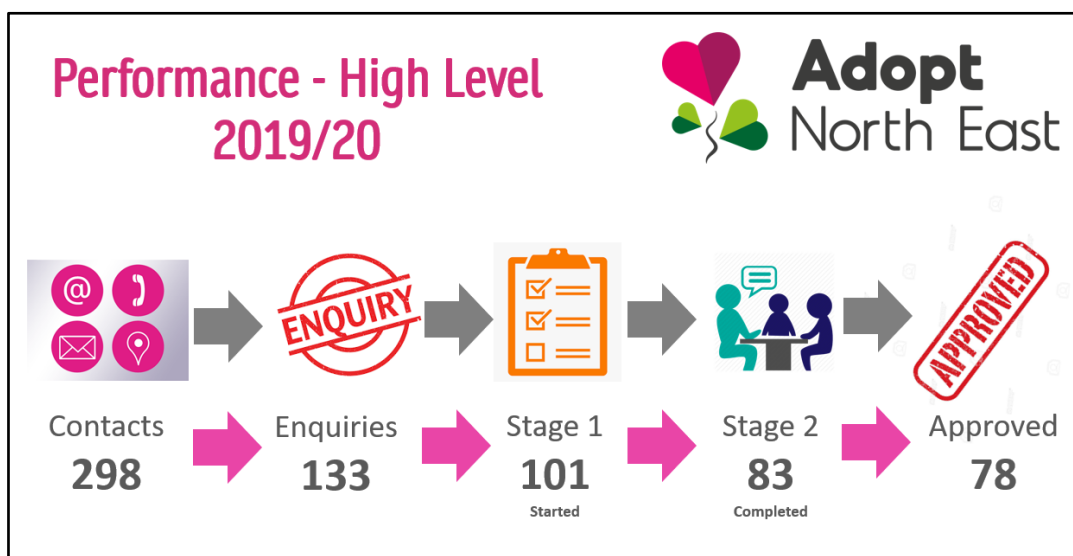
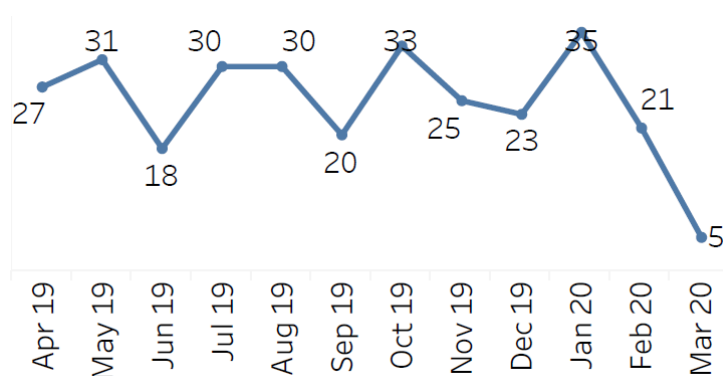


Table 6: The number of Initial Contacts made by Prospective Adopters 2019/20

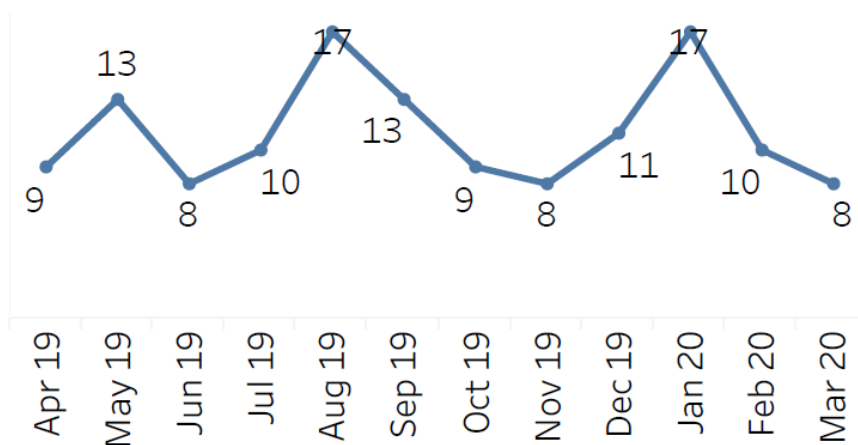


Commentary:

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 298 contacts were made by prospective adopters with the Agency. During the first eleven months of the 2019/20

year, there was an average of 27 contacts. Performance in the month of March 2020 was impacted by the increasing news of the global coronavirus pandemic and is therefore not representative. Whilst nearly 300 contacts with an entirely new Adoption Agency with no recruitment history or profile is clearly to be welcome, it is nevertheless the case that the Agency needs to average about 45-50 contacts enquiring about adoption per month to achieve numerical sufficiency of adopters for the number of children referred.

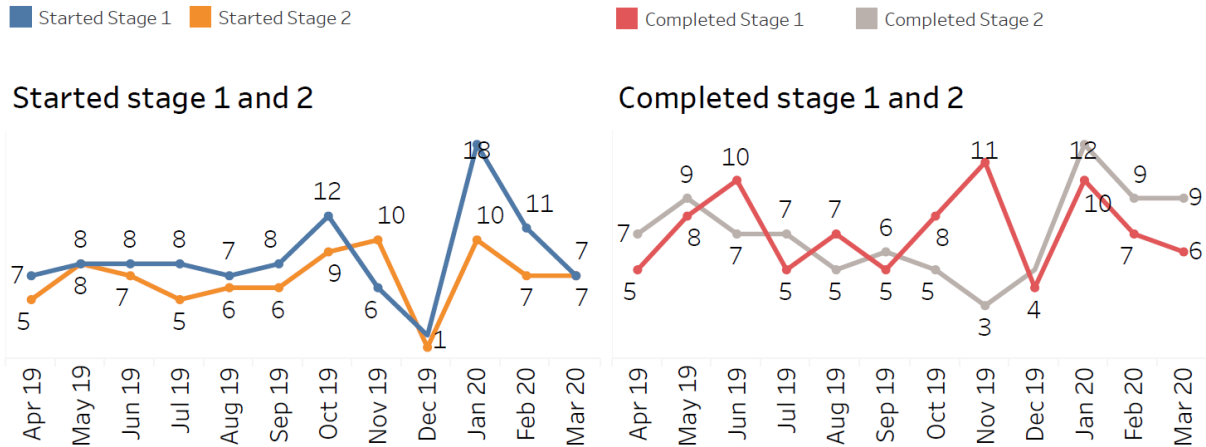
Table 7: The number of Enquiries made by Prospective Adopters 2019/20



Commentary:

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 133 Enquiries were made by prospective adopters with the Agency. Each enquiry resulted in a Social Work Initial Visit. During the twelve months of 2019/20 there was an average of 11 Enquiries per month. As noted in the Commentary in relation to Contacts, given that about only about half of Enquiries lead to eventual approval, the Agency needs to average about 25 Enquiries per month to achieve numerical sufficiency of adopters for the number of children referred.

Table 8: The number of Stage 1 and Stage 2 Assessments Started and Completed in 2019/20

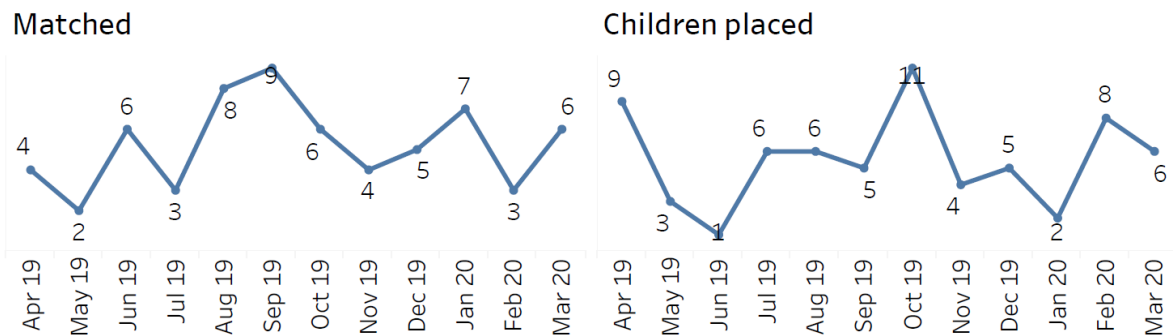


Commentary:

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 101 assessments at Stage 1 were progressed by the Agency and 83 completed. 8 (8%) applicants withdrew at Stage 1 or did not progress to Stage 2.

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 86 assessments at Stage 2 were progressed by the Agency and 83 completed.

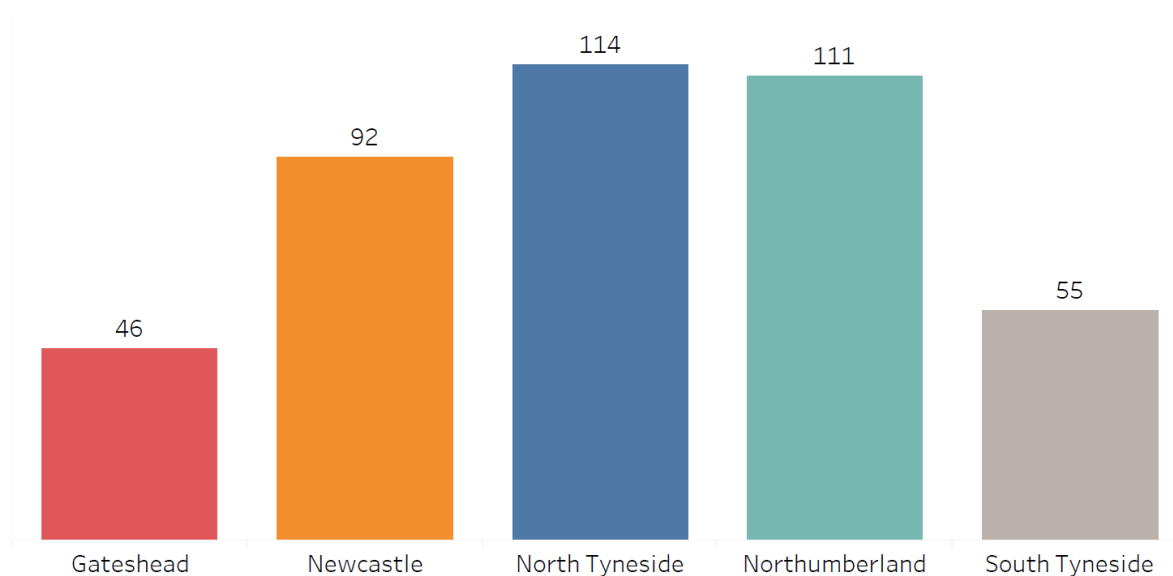
Table 9: Number of Approved Adopters Matched and Number of Children Placed in 2019/20



During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 63 approved Adopters were matched with children. All the children matched were children in the care of the five Local Authority partners with no children from other Local Authorities. 65 children were placed. 9 approved adopters withdrew from the process.

Performance Data – Post Adoption Support

Table 11: Number of families in receipt of Post Adoption Support by LA Partner 2019/20



Commentary

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, 453 families have been supported with Post Adoption Support. The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) continues to be used throughout the region to provide families with therapeutic interventions. This is a large and growing area of activity for Adopt North East and in Year 2 a detailed review of the support service will be undertaken.

Inspection Findings

Two partner Local Authorities were inspections by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education and Social Care) during 2019/20. Both commended the work of Adopt North East as the Regional Adoption Agency for Northumberland County Council and North Tyneside Council respectively.

Northumberland County Council (20 January – 31 January 2020)

When children's permanence plan is adoption, comprehensive tracking ensures that children are effectively and swiftly matched with prospective adopters.

North Tyneside Council (09 March – 13 March 2020)

The regional adoption agency (Adopt North East), which is hosted by the local authority, is delivering positive and timely outcomes for children from North Tyneside whose plan for permanence involves adoption. Prospective adopters are carefully and properly prepared. Prospective adopter reports provide clear and concise assessments of the prospective adopters' parenting capacity and their ability to provide the love, warmth, comfort and security that children need. Adopters who had experienced a particularly distressing and wholly unexpected adoption breakdown during the introductory process could not speak highly enough about the support they received from the adoption service, which has encouraged them to give adoption another go.

The adoption panel provides an appropriate level of critical scrutiny and challenge. Post-adoption support is well considered.

Adopt North East Performance and the National Picture

In October 2020 the Department for Education published its second Evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies Report by Ecorys UK and the Rees Centre, University of Oxford. The key messages relevant to the first Adopt North East are:

1. The transition to RAA's has not yet had a statistically significant impact on adopter sufficiency

Stakeholders from more established RAAs report adopter sufficiency is improving but the quantitative data analysis shows no statistically significant impact on adopter sufficiency yet.

Reflection:

The performance of Adopt North East in its first year of operation is consistent with the national picture, the regionalisation of adoption services has not yet

resulted in a significant uplift in the number of adopters for the children of the partner Local Authorities.

2. Longer established RAAs, defined as 2 years or older, begin to evidence less reliance on interagency placements

However, longer established RAAs (2 years +) have become less reliant on interagency placements and report placing more children (83%-100%) within their own area.

Reflection:

The performance of Adopt North East in its first year of operation is consistent with the national picture, the regionalisation of adoption services has not yet resulted in a reduction in the use of interagency placements.

3. Evidence of the benefits of RAAs relating to economies of scale for Adoption Support are starting to emerge

Interviewees across the RAAs saw the key impacts of regionalisation on adoption support as a more consistent, better quality adoption support offer

Reflection:

The performance of Adopt North East in its first year of operation is consistent with the national picture, that the regionalisation of adoption services has enabled the beginning of a more strategic approach to adoption support, both in commissioning arrangements and in the development of in-house provision.

Finance

The financial management of Adopt North East is overseen through the governance arrangements in place for the Regional Adoption Agency. This includes Quarterly Outturns to the Senior Leadership Group and Executive Board. Additionally, the Senior Manager for the Agency has monthly meetings with the allocated Finance Officer from North Tyneside Council who host the RAA. This ensures robust financial monitoring, with variance challenged and scrutinised.

The budget of Adopt North East is set by the Executive Board. For 2019/20 the budget was £2,429,982. Actual spend was £2,685,056, a variance of £255,074. The main in year variance related to a shortfall in the income target for the Agency through the selling of adopters which was partially but not wholly offset by an underspend in staffing due to vacancies carried. A £214,853 contribution from reserves and a £40,221 contribution from partner Local Authorities ensured that the Agency spend was on Budget for 2019/20.

Improvement Plan and Priorities

Infographic:

Our Key Priorities 2020/23  **Adopt North East**

Adopt North East is committed to delivering **excellent** adoption services that **transform** children's and families lives for the **better**.

We will:

- **Recruit the right forever families for children needing adoption**
- **Deliver a positive experience for those wanting to adopt**
- **Provide effective help and care to adopters and those adopted**
- **Develop a passionate, skilled group of specialist staff, committed to best practice**
- **Meet the needs and ambitions of our partner Local Authorities**

During the first year of operation of Adopt North East, the Regional Adoption Agency worked to an eight-point Improvement Plan. The plan sought to ensure the effective development of the Agency following the joining together of the adoption services and staff group from five Local Authority partners. Progress under the plan was monitored with scrutiny and challenge by the governance arrangements in place for the Agency.

The eight elements of the Improvement Plan were:

1. Effective Leadership and Governance, and Organisational Development

2. Robust Financial Management
3. Robust Performance Management
4. Effective Quality of Practice
5. Increased Adopter Recruitment
6. High Quality Adoption Support
7. Efficient and Effective Family Finding and Matching
8. Business Improvement and Efficiency

A huge amount of work has been done by the Agency, its host North Tyneside Council and its partner Local Authorities to deliver the 32 actions of the Improvement Plan and achieve measurable progress. The successful delivery of many elements of the Improvement Plan forms a strong foundation for Adopt North East to establish a longer-term strategy to deliver the vision and ambition of its partner Local Authorities, ***excellent adoption services that transform children's and families lives for the better***

Delivering the Vision: A Delivery Strategy based on Five Priorities for 2020-2023

The key priorities of Adopt North East to deliver the vision are:

1. Recruit the right forever families for children needing adoption
2. Deliver a positive experience for those wanting to adopt
3. Provide effective help and care to adopters and those adopted
4. Develop a passionate, skilled group of specialist staff, committed to best practice
5. Meet the needs and ambitions of our partner Local Authorities

Each priority will be developed has a number of specific actions to ensure that the priority is delivered.

1. Recruit the right forever families for children needing adoption

Adopt North East is not yet recruiting, assessing and approving in sufficient numbers the types of adopters it needs to ensure that all children referred to it by its five partner Local Authorities can be found families without the need to look to other agencies.

There are actions that need to Adopt North East needs to take to make this happen. Adopt North East will need to develop a greater understanding of the adopters that the Agency needs and deliver more prospective adopters in an increasingly competitive marketplace for adopters within the North East and a national decline in the numbers of prospective adopters coming forward. Accordingly, Adopt North East will need to create and sustain an attractive Agency profile, work tirelessly and innovatively on media campaigns and events that successfully target its recruitment.

Adopt North East will:

- 1.1 Develop a detailed ***understanding of the adopters the Agency needs*** to meet current and projected sufficiency, based on the profile of the children being referred to it;
- 1.2 Work with experts in media communication to effectively ***raise the profile of the Agency*** and ***target adopter recruitment*** at the prospective adopters that the Agency needs;
- 1.3 Refresh the ***Agency's information offer*** to prospective adopters to ensure that it is attractive, compelling, informative and of high quality, with both ***content and design informed by national best practice***;
- 1.4 Map, understand and target the key employers, faith and community groups and leaders of influence within the region to ***raise awareness of the Agency*** and the need for adopters;
- 1.5 Strengthen the quality of the Agency's assessments of adopters, the adoption support available and the work of Panel to ensure prospective ***adopters are supported to appropriately maximise their matching preferences***;
- 1.6 Develop the Agency's strength of practice in delivering ***targeted, child-specific recruitment activities***;
- 1.7 Explore whether ***partnering with other Adoption Agencies*** could contribute to the delivery of sufficient families for children.

2. Deliver a positive experience for those wanting to adopt

Adopt North East is ambitious to deliver the best possible adoption journey for those who choose the Agency. It does so primarily because it is committed to improving outcomes for children and adopters who feel valued and well supported by the Agency and confident in the professionalism of staff are more likely to be resilient and able to meet the needs of children matched with them. The Agency also knows that that the most effective recruiters of prospective adopter are those who have been through the process. To make sure the experience of adopters is as positive as possible, there are actions that Adopt North East needs to take to make this happen.

Adopt North East will:

- 2.1 Increase the ***range and scope of opportunities for adopters to feedback*** to the Agency their experience of their journey to better inform learning about what the Agency does well and what the Agency needs to change, ***strengthening the involvement of adopters in service design and development*** by enhancing their voice as stakeholders in the work of the Regional Adoption Agency;
- 2.2 Ensure that ***feedback*** from adopters is an ***integral part of the Quality of Practice framework*** of the Agency.

3. Provide effective help and care to adopters and those adopted

Adopt North East is ambitious to use the opportunities that regionalisation presents to strengthen the support to adopters and those adopted. The Agency has made significant progress in the support that it is able to provide but is aware that it is at the very start of a process to be more strategic in approach to adoption support, both in its commissioning arrangements and in the development of in-house provision. Adoption support matters. It is core to the success of the Agency. There are a number of actions that Adopt North East needs to take to progress development of its offer.

Adopt North East will:

- 3.1 Map and understand the actual and ***likely demand for adoption support*** to inform what the support offer should be;

- 3.2 Develop the **model of delivery** of support by the Agency, introducing a **tiered approach to meeting need**, increasing the amount of support delivered directly by the Agency;
- 3.3 Effectively **manage, monitor and quality assure** the support commissioned by the Agency to ensure that the support is of **best value** and **meets the needs** of children and adopters, achieves positive change and improves outcomes;
- 3.4 Develop and deliver **effective Post Box and Access to Records services** on behalf of the partnership.

4. Develop a passionate, skilled group of specialist staff, committed to best practice

The staff group of Adopt North East represents the pooled adoption expertise of the five partner Local Authorities and is its most important asset. During the first year of operation, the practice of the five partners has been assimilated and consolidated by the Agency. This has not been without challenge. A small minority of staff transferred to the Adopt North East have chosen to move on from the Agency and the resulting vacancies have hindered its performance and slowed its development. This appears to have been a common experience in many Regional Adoption Agencies. However, the majority of staff have proved to be extraordinarily resilient, passionate about adoption and committed to the success of the Agency as a new way of delivering adoption services in the region. From this strong base, the Agency will need to continue to ensure effective recruitment and retention and develop its quality of practice, ensuring wherever possible that it is evidence-informed, both from research and from emerging national best practice within more established Regional Adoption Agencies. There are a number of actions that Adopt North East needs to take to do so.

Adopt North East will:

- 4.1 Establish itself as the **employer of choice** within the Region for practitioners passionate about adoption, recruiting and retaining those committed to evidence-informed best practice and the highest professional standards;

- 4.2 Develop a ***strong and compelling Workforce Development Strategy*** to ensure that all Agency staff have the right skills, knowledge and expertise to transform the lives of children and families for the better;
- 4.3 Ensure that the ***operating model*** of the Agency supports the delivery of excellence in adoption through the efficient and effective delivery of services;
- 4.4 Maximise the use of ***Information Technology*** solutions to support the efficient delivery of services and the quality of practice;
- 4.5 Explore where the use of ***evidence-informed practice*** by the Agency and partners could contribute to improved outcomes, for example in assessment, family finding, moving into adoption and post-adoption contact.

5. Meet the needs and ambitions of our partner Local Authorities

Since 01 December 2018, Gateshead Council, Newcastle City Council, Northumberland County Council, North Tyneside Council and South Tyneside Council have delegated the functions of an adoption service to Adopt North East. The five partners have joint responsibility for Adopt North East and are appropriately ambitious for it on behalf of the vulnerable children and families they support.

It is clear that in the first year of operation, Adopt North East made significant strides to meet the needs and ambition of its partners, most significantly the formation and launch of the Agency whilst maintaining the full range of adoption services on behalf of the partners. The Agency also made tentative steps to build on and improve on the quality of adoption services that had been delivered before, most notably and successfully in relation to adoption support. Nevertheless, there is much still to be done to realise the full potential of regionalisation. There are a number of actions that Adopt North East needs to take to do so.

Adopt North East will:

- 5.1 Develop, strengthen and fully engage with the ***governance mechanisms*** in place to ensure the Agency's five partner Local Authorities have sufficient

- oversight and assurance regarding the operation, performance and financial management of the Agency;
- 5.2 Commission and participate in a ***range of quality assurance activities***, including internal and external Learning Reviews and regional and national benchmarking exercises to assess the performance of the Agency against comparators and national best practice to inform ongoing service development;
 - 5.3 Co-produce with partners an agreed ***Performance Management Information framework*** and ***Quality of Practice Framework*** for the Agency as well as ***shared policies and procedures*** for practitioners across the partnership;
 - 5.4 Strengthen ***connectivity between the Agency and its partners***, particularly with Local Authority Children’s Social Workers and their Team Managers;
 - 5.5 Establish, develop and maintain effective ***links between the Agency and the wider adoption system***, including Voluntary Adoption Agencies, the Judiciary, Regional and National Adoption Leaders, research and third sector organisations and the Department for Education.

How we will know if the Delivering Strategy is working

The Strategy to deliver the vision set by the partnership of excellence in adoption is deliberately ambitious. Adopt North East will work to the five key priorities it has identified as critical to meeting the vision.

Each of five priorities has a number of actions. Measuring the success completion of each of these actions will form a part of the Agency’s understanding about whether it is delivering what it set out to achieve and that the work is on the right track.

Of course, the delivery Strategy of Adopt North East will not be a success if our the Agency’s stakeholders – partner Local Authorities, children, adopters those adopted and the staff group – do not feel that the difference the Agency is trying to achieve is meeting the ambition for excellence in adoption. The Agency will be seek stakeholder feedback on a regular basis about how they think the Agency is are doing.

Finally, the success of this Delivery Strategy should mean that children and families lives are changed. The Agency will not seek excellence of services that do not make a difference – our key measure will always be that the work of the Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency transforms the lives of children and families for the better.