



Regional Adoption Agency

Annual Report 2020/21



October 2021



Gateshead Council



Newcastle City Council



Northumberland County Council



North Tyneside Council

North Tyneside Council



South Tyneside Council

South Tyneside Council

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Executive Summary

This report is the second Annual Report of the Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency. The Agency is 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.

This Report provides a summary of developments for the period 01 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, the second full operational year of Adopt North East. The report fulfils the statutory requirement that an annual report be produced. The Report is divided into subsections covering; an overview of Adopt North East, its staffing, its Panel, its performance, its finance and its improvement journey. Each section contains an infographic, some contextual information and then a narrative report for the year. This Annual Report should be read in conjunction with the Annual Performance Report for 2020/21.

The reporting period has, of course, been dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic which has impacted all aspects of the work of Agency. As the Agency provides services for children, adoptive families and those affected by adoption required by law, these could not be suspended. The Agency therefore has had to innovate, often at pace, and do things differently. By far the most fundamental change to services during the year, particularly in the first few months of the pandemic, has been the transition from face-to-face assessment and support to alternative delivery methods, principally a move online. Whilst undoubtedly challenging, the Agency can report considerable success in doing so. An example would be the continued operation of its Adoption Panel – without which children in the care of its partner Local Authorities would be stuck from moving onto permanency with their forever families. Within days of the lockdown, the Agency moved to a virtual Panel and continued to ensure timely decisions for children were made and families found. At the same time, support for adoptive families experiencing difficulties continued, with assessments of need progressing virtually to avoid delay and ensuring that families were able to access therapeutic support. The staff of the Agency deserve considerable credit for their flexibility, resilience, professionalism and courage during the past year. It is worth acknowledging that as

the Agency is underpinned by Social Work values and practice, the lack of direct personal contact with those with whom we work has been tough, as have the hours and hours of on-line meetings and home-based working. Nevertheless, the staff group have been determined to ensure that high quality adoption services have continued to be delivered - albeit differently – and the performance management information for the year evidences that the Agency has not only maintaining services but in fact significantly exceeding the performance achieved in the previous year.

During its second full year of operation, between 01 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, Adopt North East has:

- Matched **142** children, up from 100 in 2019/20, a **42% increase**
- Placed **137** children, up from 104 in 2019/20, a **32% increase**
- Supported **106** children to be adopted, up from 81 in 2019/20, a **31% increase**
- **Tripled** the use of Early Permanence Placements, from 5 in 2019/20 to **15**
- Commenced **132** prospective adoptive families at Stage 1 of the process, up from 98 in 2019/20, a **35% increase**
- Completed Stage 1 for **135** prospective adopters, up from 86 in 2019/20, a **57% increase**
- Commenced **133** prospective adoptive families at Stage 2, up from 100 in 2019/20, an **33% increase**
- Approved **106** adopters, up from 88 in 2019/20, a **20% increase**
- **Matched 121** adoptive families with children, up from 112 in 2019/20, an **8% increase**
- Supported **545** families with post-adoption support, up from 488, a **12% increase**
- **Tripled** the amount of pre-Adoption Order adoption support to families
- Supported **681** children with post adoption indirect contact (Post Box)
- Supported **107** birth families affected by adoption

The 2019/20 Annual Report concluded that ‘the development of Adopt North East into an established, effective and transformative adoption agency is far from complete’. Despite strong performance, the 2020/21 Annual Report repeats this assertion. Nevertheless, it is clear that significant progress has been made. If the first year of operation was very much about the formation of the Agency as a provider of adoption services, then its second year has been very much about consolidation, Covid-19 notwithstanding. The Agency has particularly benefitted from securing a full, permanent staff team. It has also focused tirelessly on the development and refinement of its operating model, underpinned by clear policies and procedures and

the establishment of a robust performance management framework. Whilst the Agency has not yet fully realised the potential that regionalisation of services presents, there are genuine signs that it will do so, evidenced for example by the hosting of Activity Days to find families for children who have additional complexity, the effective commissioning of over £1.2 million of therapeutic support for adoptive families, the strength of its Panel, the tenaciousness of its Family Finding, the recruitment of a diversity of adopters and an increasing reputation as an adoption agency of choice for prospective adopters in the North East.

There are undoubted areas for development. The Agency has not yet achieved sufficiency of adopters for the children referred to it, evidenced by the continued use of inter-agency placements for some children. The delivery of post-adoption indirect contact – known as Post Box – has also been a particular challenge. Significantly, the Agency is not yet as strong a learning organisation as it will need to be to deliver excellence, for example, learning from Disruptions – the premature end of a child's adoptive placement – has not been collated and disseminated in a systematic way. Likewise, the Agency has not fully obtained and utilised feedback from those it serves to improve or consult with service users on its future design and delivery. It is perhaps this latter area of development – the need for the Agency to become a more effective learning organisation – that provides the roadmap for the third year of operation. Following formation and consolidation, the Agency will now very much turn to strengthening its quality of practice.

Finally, in a lengthy document it is often difficult to summarise an entire year let alone communicate the difference the Agency makes to those with whom we work. An adoptive couple kindly decided to summarise their reflections in writing:

We both cannot express our gratitude and thanks enough to every single person of Adopt North East who we have been fortunate to come in to contact with. We only have admiration and praise for them all. Their professional manner – nothing was and still is never a problem. They have always communicated efficiently. They have shown empathy alongside good humour as suited to the occasion. How they do what they do is totally beyond me, but we are very thankful they do as without them our adoption experience would not have been as good. You have a wonderful team of dedicated professionals. Thank you.

And an adopter posted onto her Social Media:

We would absolutely recommend Adopt North East if you are considering adopting

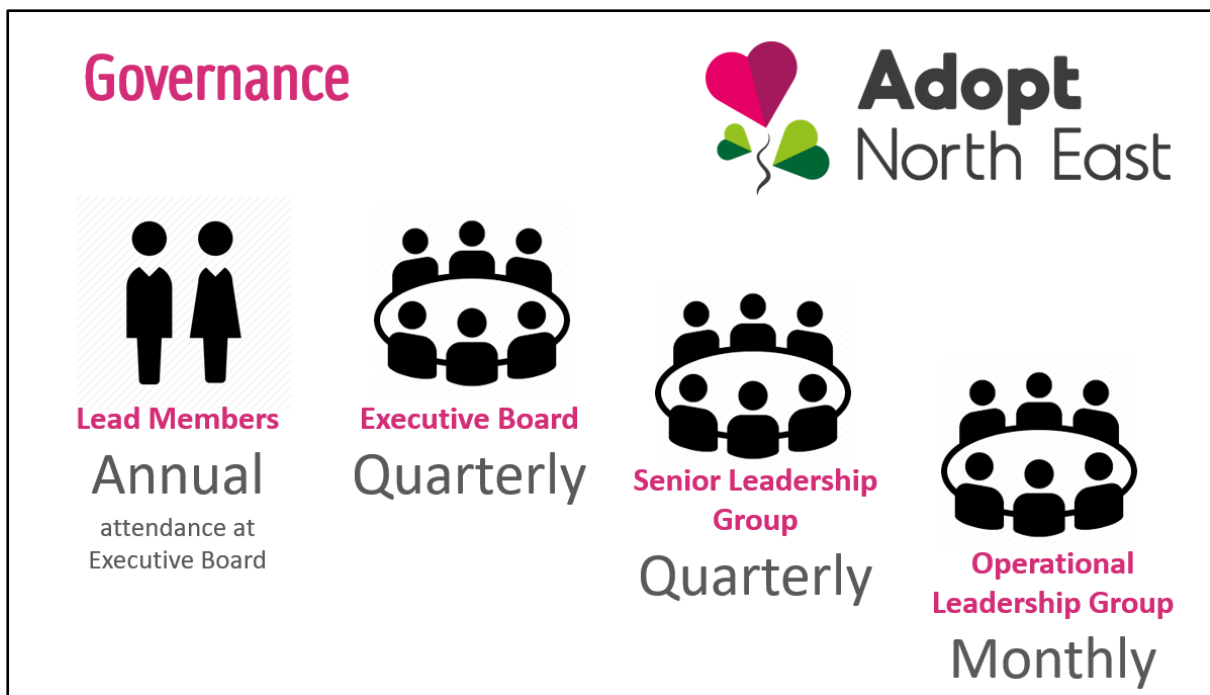
About the Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency

Adopt North East is a Regional Adoption Agency based in the North East of England. It was created in December 2018 in response to the legal requirement that local authorities regionalise their adoption services. It is a partnership between five Local Authorities: Gateshead Council, Newcastle City Council, Northumberland County Council, North Tyneside Council and South Tyneside Council. It is hosted by North Tyneside Council.

In joining their adoption services together and forming a Regional Adoption Agency, 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'***.

Governance

Infographic



Overview

The five partner Local Authorities have joint responsibility for Adopt North East.

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. It currently meets quarterly.

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.

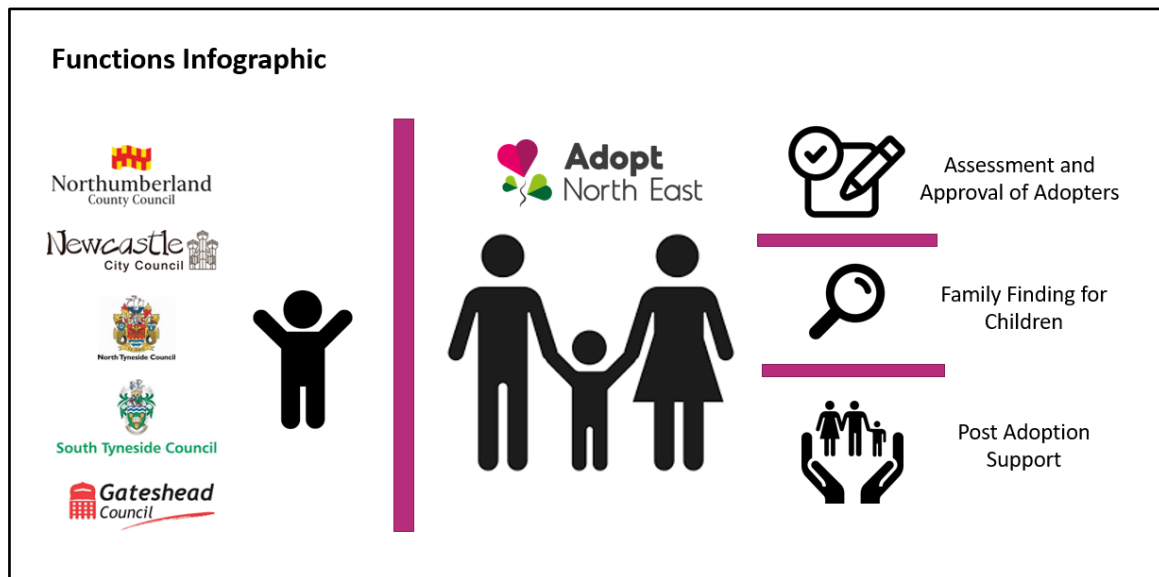
2020-2021 Report

The five Local Authority partners have joint responsibility for Adopt North East and are appropriately ambitious for the Agency on behalf of the vulnerable children and families that they support. All five partners actively participate in the governance arrangements and all the governance meetings during the reporting period have been well attended. No meetings have been stood-down due to insufficient quoracy. Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, within the period, governance meetings have been virtual.

The monthly Operational Leadership Group has been particularly effective in acting as a driver to the success of regionalisation during the period. The regular meeting of five experienced and knowledgeable Senior Managers for Permanency has been of significant benefit to the Agency as a new and developing service. An agreed Forward Plan enables the Group to undertake a thematic review of an area of practice – for example Family Finding or Post Adoption Support – at every meeting. The group have also successfully co-produced a range of policies and procedures for practitioners involved in adoption. Work in the period has included policies relating to Early Permanence Placements and Relinquishments. The group adopts a strengths-based and solution-focused approach. Candid conversations are encouraged and any issues that emerge that impact outcomes for children and the success of the partnership are shared and actions agreed to ensure prompt resolution.

Services

Infographic



Overview

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.

A more detailed description of services can be found in the Adopt North East Statement of Purpose.

2020-2021 Report

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The delivery of adoption services by the Agency throughout the reporting period have been dominated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike a number of services provided by Local Authorities, because of the statutory nature of adoption services, the Agency had to continue to deliver all of its services throughout the pandemic. Huge efforts were made by the whole staff group to continue their work whilst complying with most up-to-date Public Health guidance about the need to reduce the amount of direct

face-to-face with children and adults to protect both staff and service users from transmission of the disease.

The principal change in services delivered by the Agency resulting from the pandemic was the transition to indirect methods of communication. Practitioners adapted quickly and professionally to the need to reduce direct contact and worked to a blend of socially distanced but still face-to-face meetings, social media messaging and virtual meetings using MS-Teams. Innovative practice evolved rapidly, assisted by the strength of ICT provision for the Agency. As a consequence, the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, family-finding and the provision of post adoption support services was maintained throughout the pandemic for the duration of the reporting period.

Use of Flexibilities during the Pandemic

In April 2020, the Government introduced into law the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 which made temporary amendments to various statutory requirements a Regional Adoption Agency must follow. In its consideration of whether to use the flexibilities provided for by the Regulations, Adopt North East followed the DfE Guidance for Children's Social Care Services which noted that such flexibilities should only be used when absolutely necessary, with senior management oversight, be time-limited and regularly reviewed. With the agreement of the Assistant Director for Children's Services of North Tyneside, the Agency utilised the flexibility that enabled medical checks of applicant adopters to be completed as part of Stage 2 of the assessment process in order to alleviate pressure on health professionals. The Agency also used the flexibility that an adopter medical check could be undertaken virtually by a health professional. The Agency, briefly, utilised a flexibility that enabled the minimum number of panel members required to be reduced from 5 to 3, however due to the success of virtual Panels, the Agency reverted to normal quoracy within a few months of the pandemic. The Agency ceased use of all flexibilities in advance of their legal lapse in September 2021.

Commissioned Services

i. PAC-UK

Adopt North East continues to partner and commission PAC-UK to provide specialist services for birth parents, relatives and adopted persons. PAC-UK is a national organisation with expertise in these areas. Like all commissioned services, the performance of PAC-UK is robustly monitored by Adopt North East with expert support from a North Tyneside Commissioning Manager. This includes three monthly review meetings to ensure the quality of service provision, effective partnership working and best value are achieved. No issues emerged during the reporting period regarding the services provided.

ii. Barnardos

During the reporting period, the Agency temporarily commissioned Barnardos to provide some limited additional assessing Social Worker capacity to ensure the timeliness of assessment of prospective adopters due to court delays resulting from the pandemic. As a result of these delays, the Agency had to maintain case responsibility for adoption placements for longer than would otherwise have been the case impacting the 'throughput' of casework. With expert support from a North Tyneside Commissioning Manager, a Service Level Agreement was developed for the delivery of ten prospective adopter assessments. Three monthly review meetings have ensured that quality of service provision, effective partnership working and best value have been achieved. No issues emerged during the reporting period regarding the services provided.

iii. Inter-Country Adoption Centre (IAC)

Adopt North East continues to commission the Inter-Country Adoption Centre (IAC) to act on its behalf for all requests for information, for the assessment of prospective adopters and for support of adopters until the child enters the UK with their adopters. Adopt North East commissions IAC to ensure that prospective adopters receive the highest quality service relating to issues outside of the normal practice of Adopt North East, including specialist knowledge of UK immigration laws and the legal framework of the child's host country. With expert support from a North Tyneside Commissioning Manager, six monthly review meetings are held to ensure that quality of service provision, effective partnership working and best value have been achieved. No issues emerged during the reporting period regarding the services provided.

Statement of Purpose

Overview

The Agency is required by law to maintain an up-to-date Statement of Purpose. The Statement of Purpose explains in writing what the aims and objectives of the Agency are and provides a description of the services it provides. It is written so that children, young people, families and professionals can use it as a guide to what they can and should expect from Adopt North East. It is reviewed and endorsed on an annual basis in July of each year.

2020-2021 Report

The Adopt North East Statement of Purpose was reviewed within the period. The Statement of Purpose was subsequently updated and reformatted in June 2021 by the Senior Manager of Adopt North East in consultation with the staff group of Adopt North East and stakeholders, including Panel. It was endorsed on 09 July 2021 by the Senior

Leadership Group. A copy is available by the Agency upon request and it is made publicly available on the Adopt North East website.

[Adopt North East Statement of Purpose 2021](#)

Web, Social Media and Marketing Profile

Infographic

Marketing Campaigns

Adopt North East

Do something life-changing

Children are waiting to be adopted.
Change a life ♥ Change your own
♥ Adopt with us
(0191) 643 5000
www.adoptnortheast.org.uk

Autumn 2020

**Who can adopt?
...You Can!**

Start your adoption journey with us

We welcome all adoption enquiries regardless of age, disability, sex, gender identity, race, religion or sexual orientation.
You can be single, married or in a partnership.

That's the message from Adopt North East, the adoption agency for the North East, working on behalf of North Tyneside, Newcastle, Northumberland, Gateshead and South Tyneside councils.

You could be the forever family for children who are currently waiting for your application, in particular sibling groups, school-age children and children with additional health or emotional needs.

"We would absolutely encourage Adopt North East to anyone thinking about adoption."

Telephone 0191 643 5000
Email adoptnortheast@northtyneside.gov.uk www.adoptnortheast.org.uk

Spring 2021

Overview

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 minority ethnic 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 office. 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 minority ethnic communities, older children, sibling groups and those with additional needs

2020-2021 Report

During the reporting period, two large adopter recruitment campaigns were delivered by the Agency with specialist support from the North Tyneside Council Communications Team. The Autumn 2020 Campaign was entitled 'Do something life-changing' and focused imagery and messaging about 'children waiting' for adoption and the positives of adoption. This included a region-wide radio advert, print advertising and social media. The Spring 2021 Campaign was entitled 'Who can adopt... you can' and rather than focusing on images and the needs of children, instead focused on the diversity of adopters. The campaign included region-wide, print advertising and social media. The Agency, upon advice, did not focus advertising on or around public transport hubs due to the significant reduction in 'footfall' as a consequence of the pandemic.

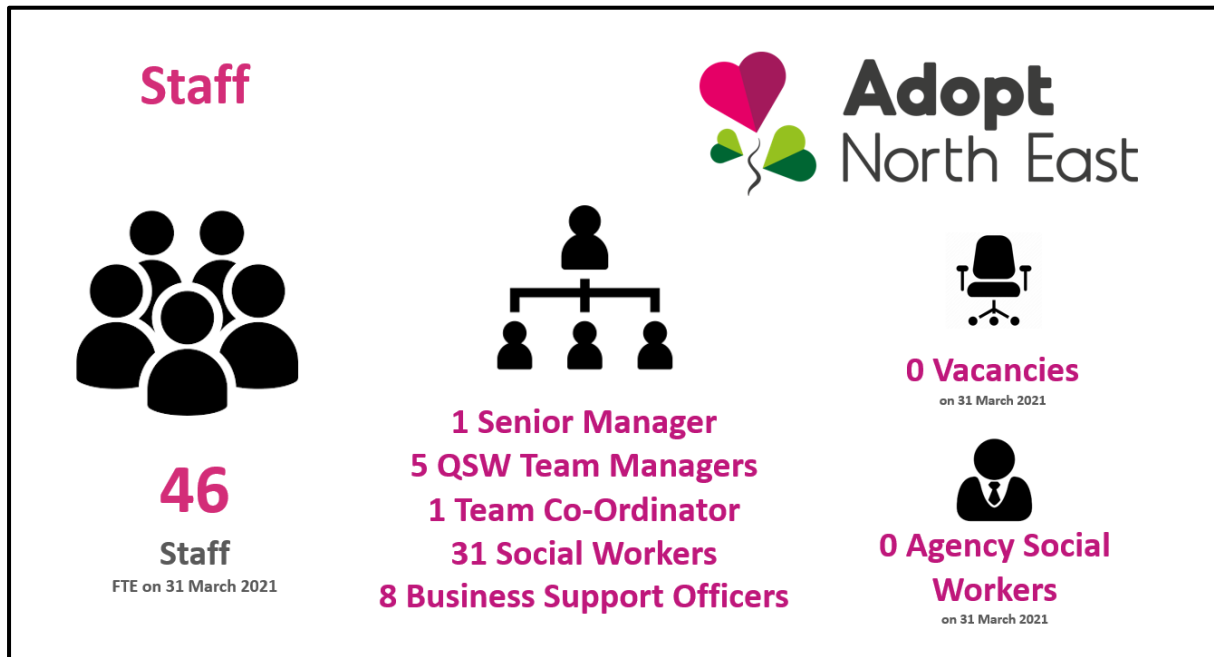
During the year, media communications have included:

- Adopt North East Website
- Radio Advertising (October 2020)
- 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

About the Adopt North East Staff Group

Recruitment and Retention

Infographic



Overview

Working for Adopt North East presents a unique professional opportunity for members of staff to work across a large geographical area and to contribute to outcomes for children across five different local authority areas.

Adopt North East has a staff group of just under 50 members of staff, including over 30 Qualified Social Workers. All Qualified Social Work staff hold a recognised qualification in social work and are registered with Social Work England. All staff are subject to Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks upon commencement of employment and checked thereafter on a three-year rolling basis.

All staff are employed directly by North Tyneside Council and enjoy the benefits of being part of the Authority's Children's Services, graded Outstanding by Ofsted in March 2020. This includes a commitment to high quality supervision and management oversight, excellent training opportunities, support for career progression, good office accommodation, a modern case management system and agile working solutions.

2020-2021 Report

In last year's Annual Report it was noted that during the first year of operation, a number of staff who had been transferred to Adopt North East at its launch had chosen to move on from the Agency and the resulting vacancies had arguably hindered the Agency's performance and slowed its development. The Annual Report noted that the Agency was reliant on some Agency Social Work staff and also carried some vacancies. Accordingly, the achievement of stability of the staff group has been a strategic priority for the Agency throughout this reporting period. Despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Agency has successfully delivered on this priority and recruited to all vacant posts and ended its reliance on temporary Agency Social Work staff.

Recruitment to Adopt North East has been strengthened through the development of a recruiting profile distinct from its host, North Tyneside Council. This has arguably enabled practitioners passionate about adoption to more readily consider and commit to the Agency. It is also perhaps testament to the growing reputation of the Agency that the last two recruitment rounds (December 2020 and March 2021) were heavily over-subscribed and applicants were of high-calibre and offered experience.

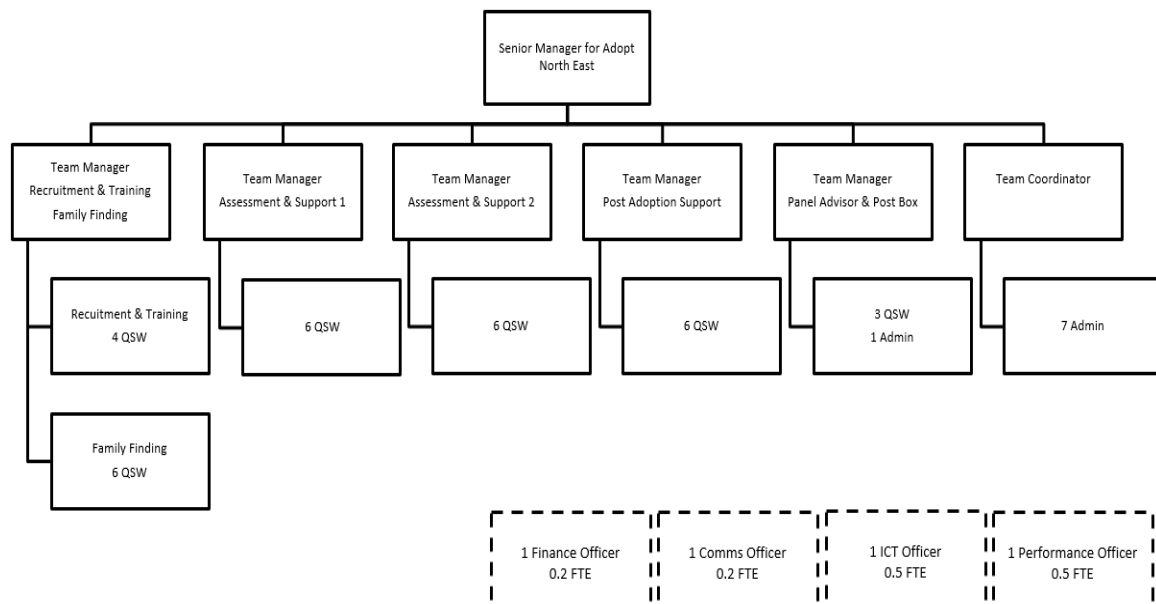
At the commencement of the reporting period, the Senior Manager post of Adopt North East became vacant following the departure of the post holder, Bryan Glover. Interim arrangements were put into place by the host Authority and a member of the Council's Children's Services Senior Management Team, Nik Flavell, took up the post on a temporary basis. Following unsuccessful recruitment to the role in October 2020, the Executive Board agreed in December 2020 to the two-year secondment of Nik Flavell as Senior Manager for the Agency.

There has been a significant reduction in staff leaving the Agency during the period. This suggests that the staff group has stabilised following the initial challenges of regionalisation and that those who remain are resilient, passionate about adoption and committed to the success of the Agency. This can only be to the long-term benefit of the Agency. Despite increased retention, work has nevertheless been undertaken to further strengthen retention for the Agency by creating Advanced Practitioner posts. Following Consultation, three posts have been created and will enable staff seeking progression or the opportunity to develop specialisms to remain with the Agency. It is also hoped that these posts will enable succession planning for future management posts.

Finally, given the personal and professional challenges during the reporting period because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Agency commissioned two twilight sessions in relation to professional self-care by Steph Hunter, a published author on the subject. At well attended sessions, staff were challenged to be more intentional about self-care and provided with some practical suggested strategies. Staff fed back that these sessions were positively received and of benefit.

Organisational Structure

Infographic



Overview

The Agency is currently split into 4 service specific delivery areas: Recruitment, Assessment and Support, Family Finding and Post Adoption Support. The Teams are supported by a dedicated Business Support Team.

Every team is managed by knowledgeable and experienced Team Manager. 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.

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.

2020-2021 Report

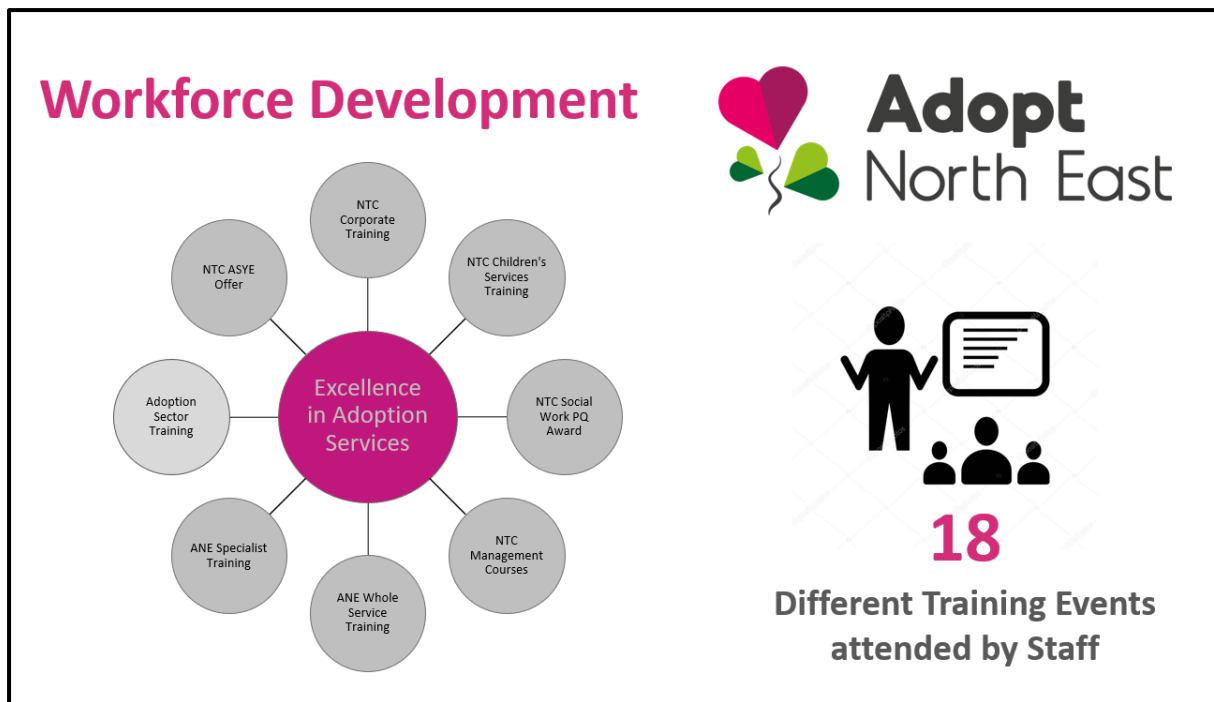
There were no changes to the organisational structure of the Agency during the reporting period. However, during the year the Management Group of the Agency reviewed the structure and operating model of the Agency to ensure that it supports the delivery of excellence in adoption through the efficient and effective delivery of services. This review led to a number of proposed changes to the structure. These changes were subject to staff Consultation outside of the reporting period (July-August 2021) and will be implemented in Quarters 3 and 4 of 2021/22.

The proposed changes include:

- Merging the Recruitment and Training Team function with the Assessment and Support function enabling Social Work continuity for applicant adopters, increasing resilience of the recruitment activity and increasing capacity of the Agency in adopter assessments
- Disbanding the stand-alone Post Box Team, reverting the activity back into the Post Adoption Support Team, enabling a more integrated offer of support and increasing the resilience and capacity of the service
- Creating three Advanced Practitioner Posts to provide expertise in Training, Family Finding and Post Adoption Support and adding capacity to formally mentor less experienced staff
- Creating an additional Team Manager post to ensure regular directive and reflective Supervision of casework and increase the change management capacity of the Agency
- Extending the Agency Advisor role to a more formal responsibility for whole-service quality of practice work, including learning from Disruptions and championing the implementation of the partnership-wide evidence-based model of introductions
- Increasing Business Support capacity to ensure the timely administration of Adoption Support Fund applications

Workforce Development

Infographic



Overview

Delivery Objective Four of the Agency is to ***develop a passionate, skilled group of specialist staff, committed to best practice.*** This objective recognises that the Adopt North East workforce is its biggest asset and critical to achieving the ambition for excellence in adoption services.

2020-2021 Report

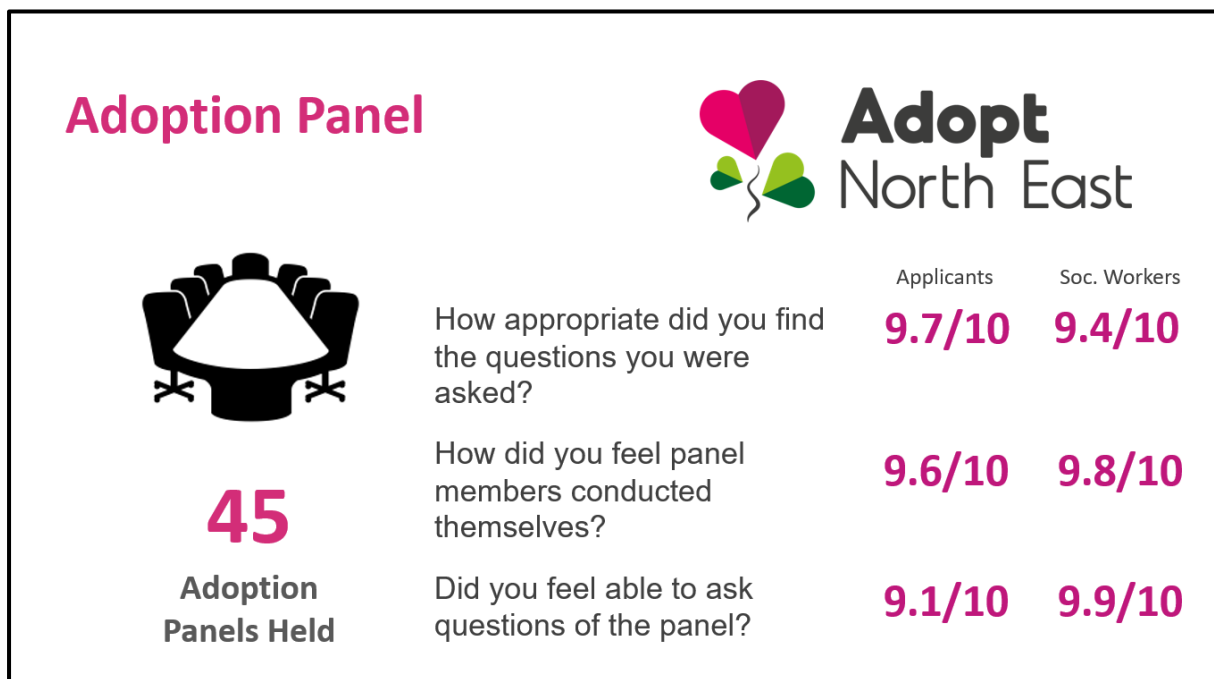
During the reporting period, staff at Adopt North East accessed a range of workforce development opportunities to inform and strengthen their practice. These opportunities included:

- Induction and System Familiarity for new staff
- Information Governance
- Equality and Diversity
- Case Recording Training
- Practice Educator Award
- Attachment Training
- Social Media Training and Post Adoption Contact
- Effective use of Linkmaker

- Effective Assessment Training
- Containment Techniques
- Panel Training
- Panel Administration Training
- Early Permanence
- Non-Violent Resistance (NVR)
- Cornerstone Virtual Reality training
- Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Secure Base Model Training
- UEA Model of Introductions Training
- Professional Self-care

About the Adopt North East Adoption Panel

Infographic



Overview

The Adopt North East Adoption Panel performs an important role in assisting the Agency to reach the best possible decision in respect of:

- The suitability of prospective adopters or the termination of approval of a prospective adopter, and

- Whether a child should be placed for adoption with a specific prospective adopter.

Additionally, the Agency's Adoption Panel plays an important quality assurance role, providing objectivity and having the ability to challenge practice which is felt not to be in the interests of children or fall short of the regulations governing adoption or Adoption National Minimum Standards. The Panel is required to give regular feedback to the Agency on a six-monthly basis.

The Agency is required by law to maintain a 'Central List' of people it considers suitable to be a member of the Adoption panel. The Agency works hard to maintain a pool of people with different skills, experience and qualifications to bring to its deliberations.

2020-21 Report

The delivery of the Adoption Panel function by the Agency was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic public health advice that group-based meetings could not take place indoors in March 2020. As the suspension of Panel activity would mean that decisions for children and the availability of adopters would be delayed, the Agency worked tirelessly in the early weeks of the pandemic to establish a viable alternative. After some experimentation of different platforms, the Agency adopted the Microsoft Teams platform. This has proved to be a reliable, safe and secure platform. The Agency would want to thank and commend all those involved in Panel for their forbearance with virtual meetings – which can last all day. Panel Members received a mug emblazoned with 'You're on mute!' as a thank you and acknowledgement of their work!

Despite the challenges of 'virtual Panels' Panel activity has increased during the reporting period and are now held weekly to accommodate demand.

Independent Chairs

The Agency said a fond farewell to Ann White as Independent Panel Chair. Ann retired from her position in December 2020 after being with the Agency from the beginning. Ann was an experienced Panel Chair, having previously chaired for Northumberland County Council and South Tyneside Council. She brought a wealth of experience to the role and established a very strong foundation to the Panel practice of the Agency in its first two years.

Following open recruitment, Lisa Henderson and Yvonne Hamilton were appointed after competitive interviews. Lisa had been a Vice Chair for the Agency and became Panel Chair in October 2020. Yvonne, Chair of Hartlepool's Fostering Panel, began chairing in January 2021.

Independent Vice Chairs

Judith Capstick-Meredith continues in her role as Vice Chair (deputising as Chair on a number of items at panel with confidence and skill). Due to Lisa Henderson's move to Chair, the Agency interviewed and appointed Steph Hunter as Vice Chair in October 2020. Steph comes from a Social Work and therapeutic background and brings to the role a wealth of experience working with children who have been in foster care or adopted.

Professional and Lay Members

The other members of the Adopt North East 'Central List' are as follows:

- 5 Qualified Social Workers
- 8 Adoptive Parents
- 2 Adopted Persons
- 2 Foster Carers
- 4 Education representatives
- 1 Independent (Health Visitor)
- 1 Independent (Retired Solicitor)
- 2 Child Therapists

The Agency continues to seek Panel Members from minority communities. The Panel benefits from members of the LGBT community, male and female members and has seen a welcome increase in the racial diversity of Panel with a Black British Panel Member. Panel continues to seek further minority ethnic representation to better reflect the demography of the population it serves. Additionally, the Agency would particularly welcome a care experienced adult to join Panel. Recruitment work is ongoing.

Agency Advisor to Panel

Adopt North East has a dedicated Panel Advisor post. The post is held by an experienced Team Manager, Barbara Hodgson. The Advisor is not a panel member and does not take part in the decision-making process. However, the Advisor regularly contributes to Panel Meetings by providing advice, for example about the Agency's procedures and practices.

The Agency Advisor has an important role in quality assurance and liaises with Team Managers to quality assure the Child's Permanence Reports (CPR), the Prospective Adopter's Report (PAR) and the Adoption Placement Report (APR). Where there are concerns about a report, the Agency Advisor is responsible for deciding whether the report should be presented to Panel and the Agency Decision Maker.

Medical Advisors to Panel

Panel is very well supported by a Medical Advisor for applicant adopters, Dr. Jane Holmes, and also by 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. During the reporting period, six-monthly meetings have been established with the Medical Advisors, Agency Advisor and Senior Manager who acts as Agency Decision Maker for approvals. These meetings enable discussion about health-related issues for children and adopters. In December 2020, co-produced guidance to Agency practitioners on the issues relating to overweight applicant adopters was developed. This enables a sensitive and evidence-informed assessment of applicant adopters in the best interests of children.










Feedback from Attendees

- ***It was a lovely experience and we were a bit nervous but once we knew everyone we were fine. It felt less daunting because we were on the computer and it was more relaxing.***
- ***We thought the questions were appropriate, about the children and how we were managing, we were given ample time to answer and expand if we so wished. We were given an opportunity to ask questions but any that we had were answered within our chat [function on MS Teams] which was excellent. Panel members made us feel at ease although it was still a serious conversation.***
- ***We felt that the panel flowed more like an open conversation which helped us relax. We were incredibly nervous beforehand but felt at ease once it had started. Our Chair explained the process very well and we could feel the positivity in her voice.***
- ***Panel was a lovely experience, we were made to feel very relaxed and the instructions on how to access the Panel beforehand were very clear. It was an effective way of communicating during COVID-19 and we are very grateful this was put in place so our process was not held up.***
- ***Overall it was a pleasant experience. No suggestions to make as we feel our Panel experience was very good under the current Covid19 circumstances. Thanks again Chair for putting us at ease and making our experience a nice one.***
- ***We found the Panel to be excellent and really well organised with the current [Covid-19 pandemic] situation. We did not have one problem and the Chair was amazing and made us feel at ease.***
- ***The experience was not as intimidating as we thought. Being online does take away from the personal side of Panel, but we understand that due to circumstances [of the Covid-19 pandemic] this was not possible.***
- ***Extremely comfortable, the Social Worker was nothing short of amazing and prepared us. We thought the use of Teams worked very well***

- *It was a welcoming experience. All Panel Members, especially the Chair, with whom we spoke for the most part, made us feel listened to and valued. Everyone greeted us with warmth and seemed genuinely happy for us. We couldn't have wished for a kinder group of people.*
- *We found it helpful having the profiles of Panel members in advance. It helped to alleviate our nerves, as it was less daunting knowing a little about the Panel members ahead of Panel and being able to recognise some faces on the day. It helped consolidate our view that Panel members all have significant life experience of adoption and would be interested in our perspectives. As it is an emotive day with a lot to take on board in a short time, it was a respectful gesture that, having given our life stories for the purposes of our PAR, we should be given an insight into the lives of the people who would be considering our application.*
- *We felt very nervous but were made to feel at ease by all Panel members. We have been happy overall with the whole process and thankful that we could progress despite pandemic. Very positive and well conducted.*
- *I felt the panel members seemed to be lovely and appropriately qualified/experienced. They had clearly read our PAR [Prospective Adopter Report] and raised questions reflecting on this.*
- *Everyone on the Panel appeared very supportive and approachable. I was very nervous before Panel but I actually enjoyed the process. Quite comfortable although waiting whilst staring at a screen for half an hour is not ideal but at the moment [Covid-19 pandemic] we can't help that situation. The panel members were really nice and how it was started with all the nice things pointed out was really lovely. Quite emotional really.*

About the Adopt North East Performance for Children

Infographic

Performance - Children						
						
 Referred	25	41	12	28	27	133
 Placed	20	38	22	40	14	134
 Adopted	23	36	06	26	15	106

Overview

Adopt North East has primary is responsible for family finding for all children with adoption plans referred to it by the five partner Local Authorities. The partners retain overall responsibility for the children who are in their care.

The Agency has as one of its five strategic priorities ***to recruit the right forever families for children needing adoption.***

2020-2021 Report

During the reporting period, a total of 133 children were referred to the Agency by its five partners, this was just one less that in 2019/20. This evidences relative stability of demand for forever families by the partnership, although the impact of the pandemic on the number of children entering the care system may mean that there will be variance in 2021/22 in the number of children referred with plans of adoption.

A total of 142 children were matched in 2020/21 with their forever families. In 2019/20 100 children were matched by the Agency, an increase of 42%. The children included

those who were older, sibling groups and children with significant additional needs. One example of successful family finding by the Agency is as follows:

B was 7 years old at the time of referral by South Tyneside to Adopt North East. B had additional needs as a deaf child. As a result of the referral, Adopt North East undertook targeted recruitment within the deaf community to identify a prospective adopter who could meet B's needs. C, a single prospective adopter, who is deaf, came forward to express her interest in B. The Agency undertook a targeted adopter assessment of C and, following approval, B was matched and placed with C (by which time B had turned 8 years old). A robust post adoption support plan was agreed to ensure the success of the placement. B flourished in C's care and an Adoption Order has now been granted.

This is an example of in-year family finding innovation which has included Activity Days, Virtual Profiling Events and specifically commissioned DVDs of children. Regular meetings with the Local Authorities took place throughout the year and Family Finding benefitted from robust scrutiny and constructive challenge to ensure minimum delays to achieving permanence for children.

134 children were placed in 2020/21, an increase of 29% on the previous year. Every placement represents the beginning of permanence for children and a transition from temporary care. The Agency and partners have committed to implementing an evidence-informed model of transitions in the next reporting period.

Of the 134 children placed, 37 – 28% – were placed with forever families not assessed or approved by the Agency. Each of these placements incurred a nationally agreed fee which was paid by the child's Local Authority to the adopters' agency. The sufficiency of adopters is discussed below.

Very sadly, during the reporting period there were a total of 6 children (5 placements) subject to disruption, a marginal reduction from the 7 children subject to disruption in 2019/20. A 'Disruption' of an adoptive placement is the premature ending of a placement of a child that has been placed for adoption. Every disruption is a tragedy and the RAA and its partners are committed to learning from all disruptions and implementing any lessons learnt to prevent, as far as is possible, future disruptions.

Disruptions are sensitive and difficult for everyone involved. As a consequence, for the purposes of this Annual Report, the following learning by Agency is summarised in very general terms:

- 1. There may be increased vulnerability to a placement with adopters not assessed and approved by Adopt North East***

This is not to say that the Adopt North East assessment of adopters or the adopters themselves are in any way 'better' than those of other agencies. It is however the case that learning for disruptions suggests that placement with adopters not assessed and approved by Adopt North East are likely to be more vulnerable because the children placed with other agencies often have additional needs that contributed to the decision to find a forever family externally. This higher level of complexity is compounded by the fact that inter-agency placements are more often than not at greater distance from the Agency. This means that the frequency and quality of support by practitioners from both the Agency and the Local Authority may be compromised. Additionally, when problems emerge, the Agency and the Local Authority will often have less knowledge of the local network of support available to the adopters and less established relationships with professionals in the area.

2. *There may be increased vulnerability to a placement of siblings together*

This is not to say that every sibling placement is more complex than every single child placement but learning from disruptions does suggest that sibling placements may be more vulnerable by virtue of the higher level of care needs inherent in placements involving more than one child. One feature from the in-year disruptions was the comparison by adopters of the different presenting behaviours of different siblings placed and that this led to heightened concerns in relation to the perceived lesser conforming or more challenging sibling. Another factor identified was that sibling placements often generated higher levels of fatigue in adopters due to the need to meet multiple needs.

3. *There may be increased vulnerability to a placement where there is an established child already within the family*

Learning from in-year disruptions suggests the importance of preparing adopters about the likely impact of adoption on an established child within the family. Whilst entirely understandable, learning suggests that adopters may be too quick to give primacy to the needs of their established child over the needs of a child recently placed and underestimate the resilience, perseverance and focus needed to meet the early often heightened needs of the placed child as the child transitions into their care and family life.

4. *Supporting Adopters to understand behaviours that present following placement is essential*

Learning from in-year disruptions suggests that some adopters' expectations of the presenting behaviours of children placed is at variance with what is known to be the likely impact of adverse childhood experiences upon children requiring adoption. It is clear that some adopters can underestimate the impact upon a

child's behaviour of the transition from Foster Care to their care. There is also learning from disruptions that adopters need more equipping about trauma informed child development and that behaviours that 'emerge' and present in their care that were not evident in foster care may require flexibility and adaptation from the parenting they may have expected to provide.

Finally, it is worth celebrating the progress made by the Agency and partners in relation to the increased use of Early Permanence Placements. An Early Permanence Placement is a placement of a child with adopters where there is a high likelihood of adoption but no authority of the court for the child to be adopted. In the reporting period, the Agency and its partners tripled the use of Early Permanence from 5 in 2019/20 to 15 placements. An Early Permanence Placement involves placing the child during the period of temporary Local Authority care with approved adopters who are also temporarily approved by the child's Local Authority as Foster Carers for the child.

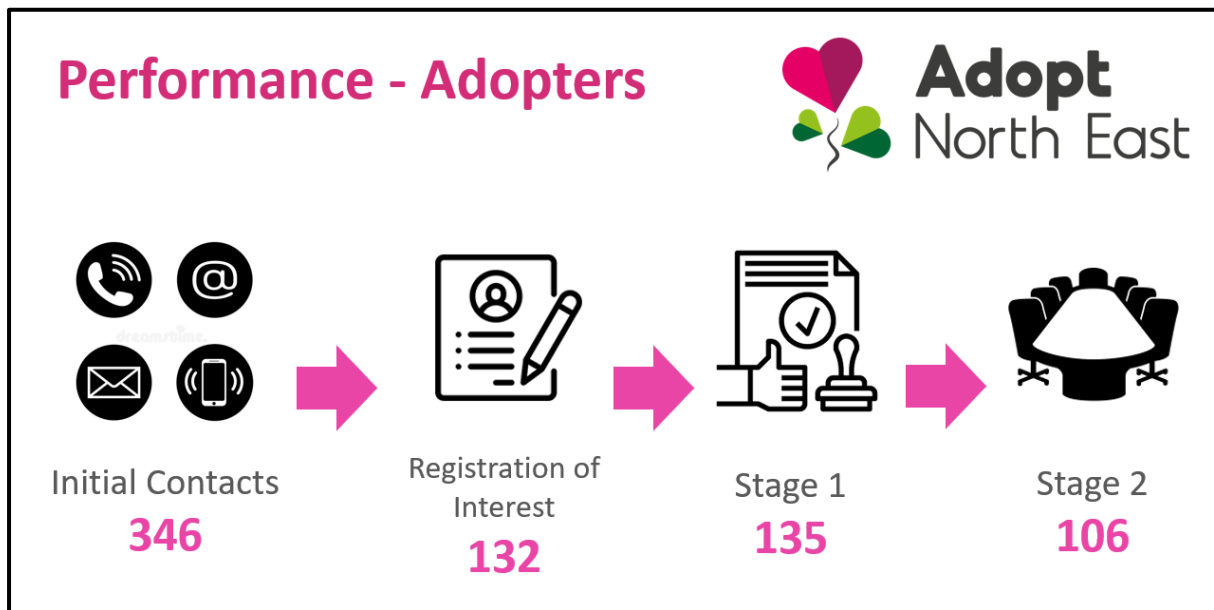
Adopt North East is committed to placing children as early as possible because Early Permanence Placement have obvious advantages for a child:

- It speeds up the planning for vulnerable babies and young children
- It avoids the damage caused by terminating temporary foster care relationships which they will have experienced as their primary parenting relationship
- It allows the early months and years of the child's life to be what most children need and expect
- the bonding period with their adoptive parents can begin sooner giving both baby and carers the opportunity of forming a close and secure attachment
- Adoptive parents may have had the opportunity to get to know their child's birth parents at contact sessions and will be in a good position to understand their background and struggles. This will be helpful for them and their adopted child in the future when adopters are talking to their child about the reasons their birth family were unable to care for them.

The Agency and its partners have developed new practice guidance to support practitioners with Early Permanence planning and placements.

About the Adopt North East Performance for those wanting to Adopt

Infographic



Overview

Adopt North East has responsibility for recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters.

The Agency has as one of its five strategic priorities ***to recruit the right forever families for children needing adoption.*** It also seeks to deliver ***a positive experience for those wanting to adopt.***

2020-2021 Report

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. It also knows that the most effective recruiters of prospective adopter are those who have been through the process.

A total of 132 prospective adopters started Stage 1 of the process – Registration of Interest – in 2020/21, an increase of 35% from the 98 in 2019/20. This evidences

strong performance by the Agency and represents a significant and encouraging increase in the work of the Agency to meet the needs of the children of the partner LA's. Of note, the number of Contacts with the Agency by applicant adopters was similar to 2019/20 and, accordingly, a far higher proportion of those making contact with the Agency commenced the process for prospective adopters. This may be attributable to more accessible information being made available by the Agency on its website without the need for contact.

A total of 135 prospective adopters completed Stage 1 – Information Sharing and Checks – in 2020/21 compared with 86 in 2019/20, a 57% increase. 106 adopters completed Stage 2 in 2020/21, an increase of 20% from the 88 in 2019/20. This year-on-year increase of 20% in approved adopters represents grounds for cautious optimism that the Agency is beginning to strengthen its sufficiency.

However, as noted, of the 137 children placed in the reporting period, 37 – 25% – were placed with forever families not assessed or approved by the Agency. As each of these placements incurs a nationally agreed fee which is paid by the child's Local Authority to the adopters' agency, the use of adopters represents a financial challenge to the partnership. Accordingly, it is a strategic priority of the Agency to become sufficient, that is to say, the achievement by Adopt North East of enough approved adopters, through recruitment and assessment activities, to successfully match, place and provide enduring permanency through adoption, all of the children referred to the Agency by its five Local Authority partners.

It is of note that the most recent published review of the Regional Adoption Agencies Programme by the Department for Education (October 2020) concedes that, nationally, Regional Adoption Agencies have not yet achieved sufficiency. Work by the RAA National Leaders Group suggests an average reported sufficiency of 69%. In the region, of the three established Regional Adoption Agencies, Adopt North East is the highest performing.

RAA	2020/21			
	Total Placed	Internal	External	% Sufficiency
Adopt Coast to Coast	137	77	60	56%
Adopt North East	137	100	37	72%
Adopt Tees Valley	82	52	30	63%

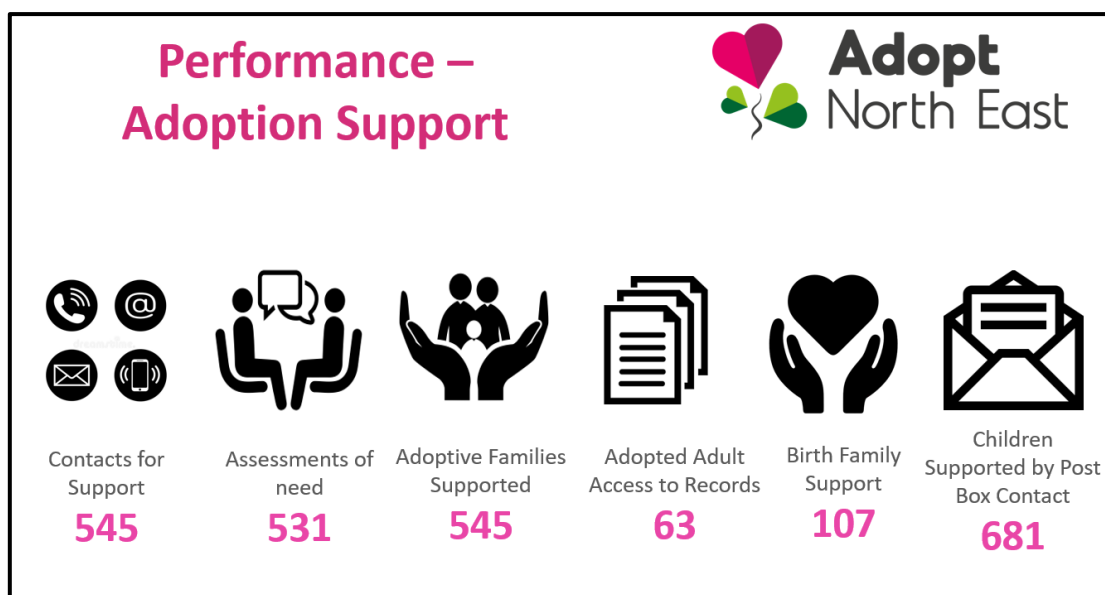
To better inform the partnership about the challenges to sufficiency, an analysis of each of the 37 children placed in inter-agency placements was undertaken by the Operational Leadership Group of Adopt North East. This has led to a number of actions that will be implemented in the new reporting period to improve sufficiency.

During the reporting period, one Regional Adoption Agency was subject to challenge by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman about the way in which it undertook Social Work initial visits to potential applicant adopters and ‘screened’ their potential suitability, providing a decision as to whether a Registration of Interest would be accepted. The Ombudsman found this practice to be at fault and incompatible with the statutory guidance. As a consequence Adopt North East reviewed its own approach to adopter recruitment. Although the Agency differed in its practice from the RAA in question, it has nonetheless strengthened the language used by Social Workers to ensure that applicants are clear of their right to Register their Interest even if the information shared with them about the adoption process by the Agency raises issues about the likelihood of approval.

Finally, during the reporting period the Agency, through a commissioned partner, supported 20 families with queries about inter-country adoption and 1 family were assessed to become approved adopters for a child from South Africa. The Agency commissions the Inter-Country Adoption Centre (IAC) to act on its behalf for all requests for information, for the assessment of prospective adopters and for support of adopters until the child enters the UK with their adopters. The Agency does so to ensure that prospective adopters receive the highest quality service relating to issues outside of the normal practice of Adopt North East, including specialist knowledge of UK immigration laws and the legal framework of the child's host country.

About the Adopt North East Performance for adopters, those adopted and those affected by adoption

Infographic



Overview

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 (indirect post-adoption contact).

Adopt North East commissions specialist services from PAC-UK, a national organisation, for adopted adults, birth parents and relatives within the family network affected by adoption.

2020-2021 Report

There were a total of 545 Contacts made to the Agency for Post Adoption Support (excluding contacts to the Agency in relation to the Post Box Service) in 2020/21, up from 453 in 2019/20. This represents a 20% increase. Whilst some of this rise may be attributed to more accurate recording of contact with the Post Adoption Support Service by the Agency, it is likely that part of the year-on-year increase may be attributable to greater awareness of the services offered and eligibility. It may also, sadly, be the result of increased difficulties emerging for adoptive families as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic within the reporting period, not least the closure of education provision for the children of adoptive families.

There were a total of 454 families provided with post Adoption Support in 2020/21 up from 418 in 2019/20, a 9% increase. One was the family of A:

The adoptive parents of A contacted ANE in distress. They explained that A had not known that he was adopted until he was 8 years old and since then he had become increasingly withdrawn from them. Things had come to a 'tipping point' and A was clearly emotionally overwhelmed, refusing to speak to them, was angry and had locked himself in his room. The adoptive parents explained they were 'close to breakdown' particularly as A was being home schooled as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. After an assessment of adoption support needs by the Agency, a therapist using Dyadic Developmental Psychology (DDP) principles was commissioned through the Adoption Support Fund to work with A on his own and with the whole family together. This began to achieve positive change for the family. The ANE Social Worker was praised for her attention and support. As a consequence, the family no longer require intensive support and the adoption is not at risk. The Agency continues to support the family and the therapy continues.

The Agency is responsible for the administration of indirect contact between children, adopters and birth families. This is a busy service and has proved a challenging area to develop, with the assimilation of thousands of historical records from the five partners a particular issue. During the reporting period, the Agency invested in

additional Business Support to centralise and systematise post box arrangements onto the Agency's case management system. This six-month project was successful and has enabled the development of performance management information and a strengthening of the operating model. Additionally, a dedicated telephone number for queries relating to Post Box was introduced to improve the responsiveness of the Agency. The Agency remains committed to improving further this service area.

Within the reporting period the Agency and its partners have clarified the arrangements for adopted adults accessing their adoption records. Adopt North East has responsibility for applicant adoptees who reside within the geographical area of the five partner Local Authorities but not for applicants who reside outside of the area. These applicants remain the responsibility of the Local Authority that was responsible for the adoption.

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 during the reporting period in the support that it is able to provide. It is planning to commission a Peer Review of its offer in November 2021 to further inform its improvement journey.

About feedback received by Adopt North East

Compliments

Infographic

Compliments

Adopt North East

My husband and I have had our little princess for 2 years now, she has made our dreams of having a family come true 😊 I would tell anyone to contact [Adopt North East](#) if they want go down this route!!! Best thing we ever did!!! 😊😊😊

We were lucky enough to adopt our 2 little munchkins with adopt North east just as they formed and even though everything was changing everyone we dealt with was fantastic!! Would absolutely recommend them if you're considering adopting ❤️ Our 2 have completed our family and at times, especially with the pandemic and lockdowns, its been tough but they are amazing and we wouldn't change a thing!!

So very true!! Adopt North East have helped make mine and my husbands dreams come true! ❤️

Not totally at the end yet but if it wasn't for ANE then we wouldn't have got our little boy which we love more then anything in the world

1 d Like Reply 6 🍌❤️

Overview

Adopt North East regularly receives the feedback of users of its services, much of it complimentary. This feedback provides assurance about the quality of practice and the experience they have of services.

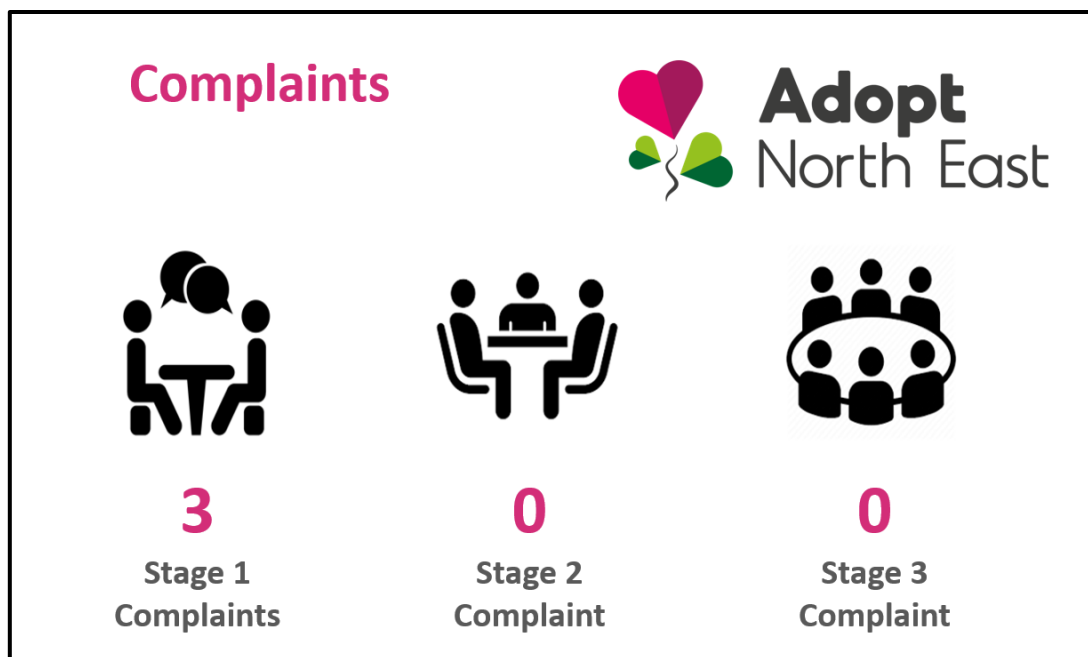
2020-2021 Report

Some of the feedback received during the reporting period:

- ***[Social Worker's name] made it so easy and comfortable. We couldn't have asked for anything better***
- ***[Social Worker's name] made us feel very welcome from the start; she was very realistic and straightforward. We didn't have a good experience with our previous Adoption Agency, we felt really let down by them and lost trust. Anytime we asked questions, we didn't receive positive responses and 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 reassured by Adopt North East. Thank you. The process has been seamless and very impressive. The training has been great and it gives us confidence***
- ***We just wanted to say Thank you [to Adopt North East] for guiding us through the training and helping us to find our family. I don't think either of us thought in May that we would be a family of 5!!!***
- ***I wasn't treated differently for being deaf and as soon as the work started, everything went smoothly. There were no issues whatsoever and I would strongly recommend Adopt North East to any deaf people because there were no problems at all.***

Complaints

Infographic



Overview

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.

2020-2021 Report

During the reporting period, Adopt North East had 3 Stage 1 Complaints and no Stage 2 or Stage 3 Complaints. This was a decrease of 5 from the 8 Stage 1 Complaints recorded in 2019/20. This reduction may be attributable to a greater focus on trying to resolve complaints at an informal stage. Significantly, the Agency is also clearer when the concern relates to the action which is the responsibility of a partner Local Authority rather than the Agency. In these instances, more robust signposting is now taking place.

The small 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 the three complaints received during the year, the following points of learning have been noted:

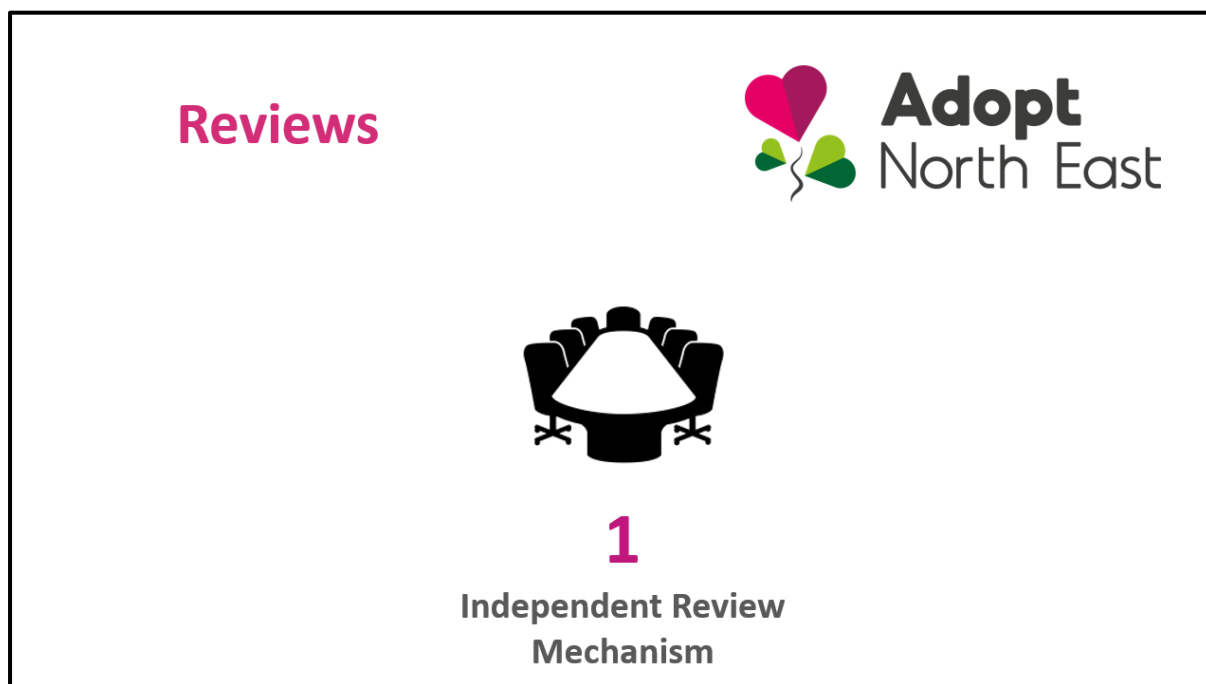
- A lack of clarity around Adoption Order Allowance eligibility
- Delays in processing Access to Records

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.

Finally, toward the end of the reporting period, work was undertaken to improve the recording and reporting of compliments and informal complaints as well as formal complaints. A new template has been introduced onto the Liquidlogic Case Management System used by the Agency to support this. It is anticipated that performance management information around complaints will be strengthened for the next reporting period.

Independent Review Mechanism

Infographic



Overview

The Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) is a review process established by law which enables prospective or existing adopters to review a decision by the Agency that they are not suitable to adopt. The IRM is not an appeal process in that it cannot overturn the decision of the Agency. It does however make a fresh recommendation following consideration by an independent Panel to the Agency on the suitability of adopters. The IRM does not have the power to consider whether adoption should be the plan for a child, or whether a child should be placed/matched with a particular prospective adopter or deal with complaints.

2020-2021 Report

Within the reporting period one case was subject to the Independent Review Mechanism.

Despite a positive recommendation by their assessing Social Worker, A and B received a negative recommendation by Panel due to concerns that their pre-existing caring responsibilities meant that they did not have the capacity to be suitable adopters. This recommendation was endorsed by the Agency Decision Maker. A and B exercised their right to review by the Independent Review Mechanism. The IRM

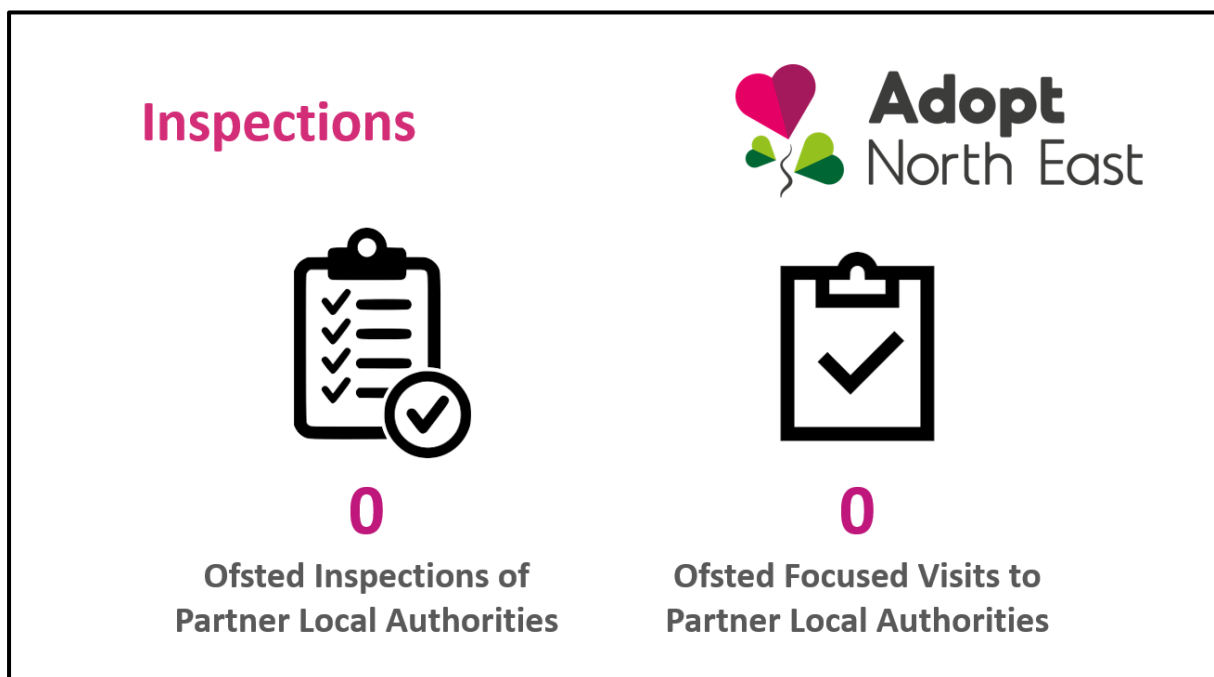
Independent Panel considered their suitability afresh in the Summer of 2020 and made a positive recommendation. The Agency Decision Maker subsequently approved A and B as suitable to adopt.

Following a Learning Review of the circumstances of the case by the Agency, it was established that the original Agency Panel had come to their recommendation, in part, on the basis of an inaccurate verbal summary of information that had itself been provided verbally by a professional who had been unable to attend Panel.

The key learning for the Agency has been to ensure that Panel have the confidence and awareness of their ability to stand down – defer – an item if either a significant participant is unable to attend or a where a key consideration that potentially impacts suitability remains unclear and Panel are of the view that without such clarity, no informed determination of suitability can be made.

Inspection Findings

Infographic



Overview

On 26 March 2021, Ofsted updated the way in which it considers a Local Authority's arrangements with a Regional Adoption Agency as part of the ILACS Inspection Framework. The Guidance notes that:

[Ofsted] are not inspecting the effectiveness of the RAA, but we do take into account the interface between the individual local authority and the RAA. We focus on how the local authority discharges its functions through the RAA and how it ensures that the RAA meets the local authority's needs. We always look at this through the lens of the local authority.

The revised ILACS Guidance states the following relevant principles:

- Ofsted are not judging the performance of the RAA.
- If a local authority is involved in an RAA, Ofsted will state the name of the RAA. However, Ofsted will only evaluate what the local authority is doing for its children and this will be the focus of the overall evaluation and final report.
- The report should not make or imply any broader evaluation of the performance of the RAA.
- Ofsted will only comment on the RAA's performance for the local authority when this represents a strength or area for improvement in meeting local need. The use of any judgement language relating to the RAA is likely to be misleading. This is because the impact of the RAA may differ between local authority partners.
- Ofsted will not share any findings with the RAA directly. The inspection relationship is with the local authority.
- Ofsted want to determine *whether children in need of adoption are well served*. At each Inspection, they are interested in the children that the local authority is responsible for.
- Whatever the local arrangements, Ofsted will ask whether there is a *sufficient and appropriate supply of adopters* for the local authority's children.
- If there are failings for children, Ofsted will ask *what the local authority has done to challenge or remedy this*.

2020-2021 Report

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, no Ofsted Inspections took place within the reporting period. It is anticipated that at least two partner Local Authorities will be inspected within the next reporting period.

The most recent inspection of a partner Local Authority which covered the adoption services provided by the Agency remains that of North Tyneside Council in March 2020 (just before the current reporting period). The Inspection found:

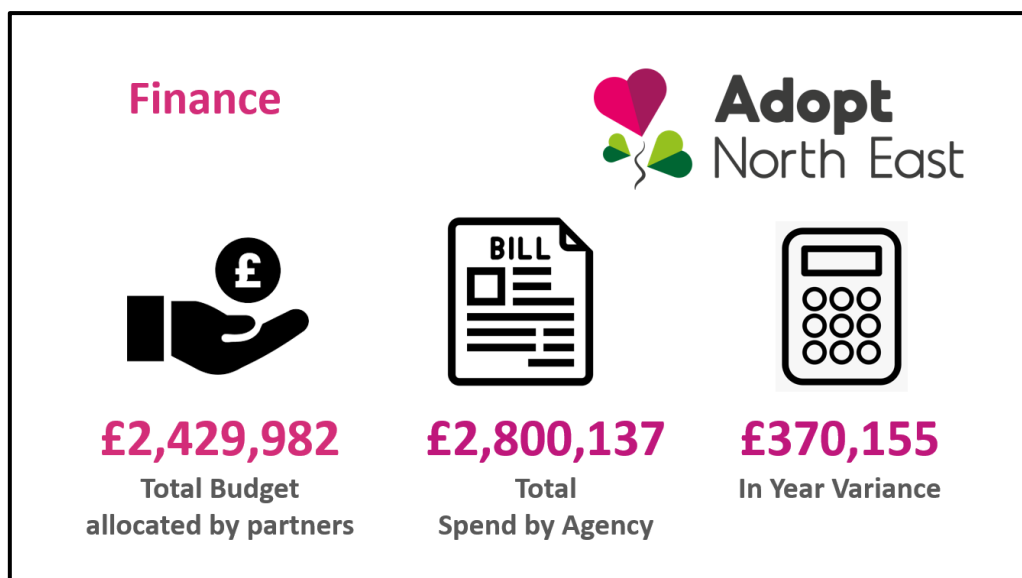
The regional adoption agency (Adopt North East), which is hosted by the local authority, is delivering positive and timely outcomes for children from North Tyneside whose plan for permanence involves adoption. Prospective adopters are carefully and properly prepared. Prospective adopter reports provide 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.

About Adopt North East Finance

Infographic



Overview

The budget of Adopt North East is set by the Executive Board. The budget is provided by the five partner Local Authorities. 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.

2020-2021 Report

The budget of Adopt North East set by the Executive Board for 2020/21 was £2,429,982 unchanged from the previous year. Actual spend for the year was £2,800,137, a variance of £370,155. The main in year variance related to a shortfall in the income target for the Agency of £650,000 to be derived from fees paid to the Agency by other agencies matching children with Adopt North East adopters. No income was generated within the reporting period. The variance was partially but not wholly offset by an underspend in staffing due to vacancies carried and an in-year reduction in some areas of planned spend. Accordingly, an additional £370,155 contribution from partner Local Authorities ensured that the Agency spend was reconciled.

During the period, the Executive Board of Adopt North East directed the Senior Leadership Group to review the finance model of the Agency. This work is ongoing and will be reported upon in the next reporting period.

The Finance Review Working Group are specifically considering:

1. The income generation expectation within the current base budget
2. Whether or not to move to an 'activity-based' approach to funding for the base budget;
3. Whether or not to move to an 'activity-based' approach to funding for any accrued deficit
4. What percentage should be based on activity-based elements;
5. What activities should be used to calculate a Local Authority contribution.
6. Whether the RAA base budget should include a budget for the purchase of inter-agency placements

The Finance Review Working Group have agreed to the following methodology:

- To review financial information relating to the operation of the Regional Adoption Agency
- To consider other financial formulae in use by other Regional Adoption Agencies
- Model alternatives to the current funding formula and note their implications and impact
- Provide recommendations on changes to the formula to the Executive Board
- Be mindful at all times of securing best value and the effective delivery of regionalised adoption services

About the Adopt North East Improvement Journey

Infographic

Our **Key** Priorities 2020/23



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, those adopted and those affected by adoption**
- **Develop a passionate, skilled group of specialist staff, committed to best practice**
- **Meet the needs and ambitions of our partner Local Authorities**

Overview

In September 2020 Adopt North East established a three year strategy – for operational years three to five – to deliver the vision and ambition of its partner Local Authorities for ***excellent adoption services that transform children's and families lives for the better***

The key priorities of Adopt North East to deliver the vision for excellence 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, those adopted and those affected by adoption
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 is subject to a number of specific actions to ensure that the priority is delivered.

2020-2021 Report

1. Recruit the right forever families for children needing adoption		
	Adopt North East said it would...	Adopt North East has...
1.1	Develop a detailed <i>understanding of the adopters the Agency needs</i> to meet current and projected sufficiency, based on the profile of the children being referred to it	Completed this action. The Agency and partners have a more detailed understanding of the needs of the children being referred to it for family finding. This understanding informs the Agency's recruitment and training of adopters.
1.2	Work with experts in media communication to effectively <i>raise the profile of the Agency and target adopter recruitment</i> at the prospective adopters that the Agency needs	Completed this action. The Agency has delivered recruitment campaigns targeted at the specific needs of the children referred.
1.3	Refresh the <i>Agency's information offer</i> to prospective adopters to ensure that it is attractive, compelling, informative and of high quality, with both <i>content and design informed by national best practice</i>	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency is in the process of reviewing and refreshing its website, with strengthened content, images and improved navigation. It is anticipated that this will be completed by January 2022. The Agency has also reviewed and update many of its hard copy leaflets, updating and refreshing where relevant.
1.4	Map, understand and target the key employers, faith and community groups and leaders of influence within the region to <i>raise awareness of the Agency</i> and the need for adopters	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency has targeted health professionals with recruitment and some community groups. It will continue to build awareness of the Agency. It is working to scope specific training with a Muslim charity raising awareness of adoption within that community.
1.5	Strengthen the quality of the Agency's assessments of adopters, the adoption support available and the work of Panel to ensure prospective <i>adopters are supported to appropriately maximise their matching preferences</i>	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency continues to develop its training and support offer so that prospective adopters will consider a wider range of children. This includes the development and delivery of specific training for Early Permanence Placements.
1.6	Develop the Agency's strength of practice in delivering <i>targeted, child-specific recruitment activities</i>	Completed this action. The Agency has delivered strengthened child-specific recruitment including the use of Profiling Events, Activity Days, DVD Profiles and Child Specific Advertising. In doing so, the Agency has developed a stronger continuum of Family Finding options for children. The Agency will continue to innovate and try new things to find families for every child referred.

1.7	Explore whether <i>partnering with other Adoption Agencies</i> could contribute to the delivery of sufficient families for children	Started this ongoing action. The Agency has significantly stepped up its engagement with other Agencies. It now participates in regular monthly meetings with the other two RAA's within the region, with other RAA's through the National Group and has established quarterly meetings with regional VAA's. Through the Regional Adoption Leadership Board (RALB) work has also commenced to improve regional adopter sufficiency.
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2. Deliver a positive experience for those wanting to adopt

	Adopt North East said it would...	Adopt North East has...
2.1	Increase the <i>range and scope of opportunities for adopters to feedback</i> 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, <i>strengthening the involvement of adopters in service design and development</i> by enhancing their voice as stakeholders in the work of the Regional Adoption Agency	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency has identified a number of key feedback points along the adopter journey and developed question sets for adopters. These will soon be deployed electronically. Additionally, from November 2021, an Adopter Reference Group will be established, providing the Agency with the voice of adopters in service design and development. The Group will meet bi-monthly.
2.2	Ensure that <i>feedback</i> from adopters is an <i>integral part of the Quality of Practice framework</i> of the Agency.	Started but not completed this action. The Agency is in the process of developing a Quality of Practice framework which will include adopter feedback. Due to other competing priorities, this is not yet complete. It will be completed for Q4 of 2020/21.

3. Provide effective help and care to adopters, those adopted and those affected by adoption

	Adopt North East said it would...	Adopt North East has...
3.1	Map and understand the actual and <i>likely demand for adoption support</i> to inform what the support offer should be;	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency and partners have a more detailed understanding of the demand for adoption support, following improvements in the data available. However, this remains a work in progress.
3.2	Develop the <i>model of delivery</i> of support by the Agency, introducing a <i>tiered approach to</i>	Deliberately not started this action yet. The Agency is committed to ensuring that any

	meeting need , increasing the amount of support delivered directly by the Agency;	change to the delivery model for PAS is evidence-based. The Agency has recently secured a Peer Review of PAS by a Senior Manager from an RAA with a PAS Centre of Excellence. Learning from this Review will be a significant element of any development of the Agency's post adoption support.
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;	Deliberately not started this action yet. The Agency is committed to moving towards an 'approved provider' model. However, other priorities have taken precedent in the reporting period. This will be a complex and lengthy piece of work, partnering with Commissioning colleagues of North Tyneside Council.
3.4	Develop and deliver effective Post Box and Access to Records services on behalf of the partnership.	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency has undertaken a Management Review of the Post Box Service. This identified a number of issues, including the use of multiple recording systems and the quality of data provided to the Agency by partners at the transfer of responsibility for Post Box to the RAA. The operational model has been redesigned and the legacy data addressed. Following Consultation, Post Box will be transferred to the Post Adoption Support Team who will be able to provide a more integrated service. Timeliness of response remains a service priority. Delivery of Access to Records to residents external to the partnership has also been resolved.

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

	Adopt North East said it would...	Adopt North East has...
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	Completed this action. Recent recruitment rounds held by Agency evidenced significant interest in posts and the Agency has benefitted from high calibre applicants. Recruitment has also benefitted from the establishment of a distinct recruitment identify for the Agency. Following significant work, the creation of Advanced Practitioner posts (from within existing resources) will strengthen retention of staff seeking progression or the opportunity to develop specialisms.

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	Completed this action. A Workforce Development Strategy has been co-produced with the staff group. Work has included a skills gap analysis. Specific specialist training such as Non-Violent Resistance (NVR), Theraplay and Panel Administration have been commissioned. Regular Whole Staff Events are now established and these include a focus on learning related to a specific areas of practice.
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	Completed this action. A review of the operating model by the Management Group of the Agency led to proposals to restructure the Agency. This was subject to Consultation. Work is underway to implement the restructure which, it is hoped, will address areas of concern and ensure 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;	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency uses the Liquidlogic Case Management System. Several workflows and form templates used by the Agency have been subject to Rapid Process Improvement Workshops which have co-produced solutions. Further work is ongoing to ensure the system is fit for purpose and helps and not hinders the Agency's delivery of adoption services.
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.	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency has implemented an evidence-informed model of introductions based on the University of East Anglia research. The Agency has also implemented the STAR model for Family Finding based on research by CoramBAAF. Work is ongoing to develop the Agency's approach to assessment, with the Secure Base Model and work by Adoption Counts being considered. The Agency is participating in national work around permanency planning (RAA Leaders) and exploring evidence-based best practice in relation to post-adoption contact.

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

	Adopt North East said it would...	Adopt North East has...
5.1	Develop, strengthen and fully engage with the governance mechanisms in place to ensure	Completed this action. Governance arrangements have been clarified, including

	the Agency's five partner Local Authorities have sufficient oversight and assurance regarding the operation, performance and financial management of the Agency	the regularity of meetings. The Operational Leadership Group has established a clear Terms of Reference and a Forward Plan.
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	Started this ongoing action. The Agency commissioned an External Review of Family Finding (Oct 2020), the learning of which has informed service development. The Agency has commissioned a Peer Review of Post Adoption Support – this is scheduled for Nov 2021.
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	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency has spent considerable time developing its performance management information, working closely with partners to understand the data they require and automate the collection and reporting of such data. The Agency is in the process of developing a Quality of Practice framework. The Agency has focused heavily on the development of a broad range of shared policies and procedures for practitioners, including in relation to Early Permanence Placements, Relinquishment and Introductions.
5.4	Strengthen connectivity between the Agency and its partners , particularly with Local Authority Children's Social Workers and their Team Managers	Worked hard but there is more to do. The Agency benefits from strong and constructive working relationships with its five Local Authority partners. However, it is evident that regionalisation has meant that adoption expertise is less accessible and the Agency is working with partners to establish how best to ensure that practitioners in adoption are as connected as possible.
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	Started this ongoing action. During the reporting period the Agency has sought to develop and strengthen links with the wider adoption system, including with other RAA's, VAA's, the judiciary, CAFCASS, the third sector and research bodies. The Agency has strengthened its network and this has enabled it to access to expertise and resources to benefit the development of the Agency.