

# Adoption Agency Adoption Support Agency

## Statement of Purpose April 2025

Approved by: Together for Children Sunderland Board

Date: April 2025

If you or someone you know needs help to understand or read this document, please contact us: 0191 561 2221

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## 1.0 Introduction

This Statement of Purpose gives details of Together for Children Sunderland Adoption Service, which is a partner in Adopt Coast to Coast, a Regional Adoption Agency. The other partner is Durham County Council. Adopt Coast to Coast was launched on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021.

Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Service is based in Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland, SR3 4EN.

This Statement of Purpose will provide useful information for children and young people, birth families, and prospective adopters, adopters, Together for Children Sunderland Board, elected members and staff.

The Statement of Purpose will be reviewed at least annually and amended as necessary. It will also be updated to accommodate changes in legislation, practice, policies, and priorities as required.

Within 28 days of any amendment the Adoption Statement of Purpose must be sent to the Chief Inspector of OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) and published on the provider's website.

## 2.0 Legal context

The Statement of Purpose fulfils the requirement of Standard 18 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011 (Care Standards Act 2000) and of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005.

The work of Adoption Services providers in England is governed by the Adoption Agencies Regulations (2005). The Regulations and National Minimum Standards are used in the inspection and registration of Adoption Agencies.

Recent Amendments in the Children and Families Act 2014 update and streamline adoption process and details of this are contained within the statement.

The Statement of Purpose will be submitted for the approval of Together for Children Sunderland Board and shared with Elected Members. It will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis, at least annually, and amended when required.

### 3.0 Aims and Objectives.

The Adoption Act 2002 promotes adoption as an option for permanence for Cared For Children. The Act places the needs and welfare of the child at the centre of the adoption process and makes the welfare of the child the paramount consideration for a court or Adoption Agency in all decisions relating to their adoption.

Together for Children Sunderland aims to ensure that all children grow up as part of a loving, caring family who can meet their needs for security, stability, and quality care throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Where children are unable, for whatever reason, to live within their own birth family, a range of services and resources will be provided, designed to assist families in providing care for their children. Where that is not possible, Together for Children Sunderland aims, through its Adoption Service, to find permanent alternative families who will promote the child's wellbeing and development by providing the highest possible standards of care according to his or her individual assessed needs.

- Work in partnership to deliver the “hub and spoke” model for Adopt Coast to Coast through collaboration in respect of its statutory adoption functions.
- Provide child-centred services.
- Deliver a high-quality accessible service to adopters and potential adopters.
- Provide an accessible independent service for birth families affected by adoption.
- Create strong partnership working with Local Authorities, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies, and universal services.

- Offer a service which is high-quality and provides good value for money.

The purpose of the service is to achieve the best possible outcomes for adopted children and their families. We work to ensure that our children are:

- Safe and secure in nurturing and caring homes; they remain healthy; achieve to the best of their abilities and become positive, independent adults.

To achieve the best possible outcomes for children and all of those affected by adoption, the Adoption Service will work to the following objectives:

- To meet the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and associated standards, regulations, and guidance.
- To ensure that the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process as presented in the Welfare Checklist (Adoption and Children Act 2002: Section 1).
- To promote good practice in adoption and provide good service outcomes to all those involved in the adoption process that are consistent with best practice.
- To contribute to Together for Children Sunderland's work and positive outcomes for children, by making timely decisions about permanence for each child, following a thorough assessment of their needs to which all relevant people have contributed.
- To ensure that effective mechanisms are in place that ensure timely decision-making processes, which include ensuring that children with an adoption plan are found their permanent family without undue delay.
- To ensure that adoption is considered as a positive option for achieving permanence outcomes for children who cannot be cared for within their family of birth.

- To ensure that birth families members are treated fairly, with respect and openness throughout the whole adoption process and that they can access appropriate adoption support services.
- To recruit and maintain sufficient diversity and numbers of prospective and approved adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children who have adoption as their plan. This will include needs arising from race, culture, ethnic origin, religion, language, disability, gender, and sexuality.
- To ensure that the adoption preparation process prepares adopters as well as possible for the task of parenting adopted children.
- To provide a child-centred matching, introduction, and moving to forever homes process and to provide safe forever homes for children that will promote equality and value diversity.
- To provide a point of contact for people living in the Sunderland area and a range of adoption support services aimed at preventing the disruption of adoptive placements and which assist adoptive families, adoptees, and birth families with the lifelong impact of adoption.
- To improve performance in adoptions for Cared For Children, including the percentage of children who are adopted from care, to meet national targets.
- To ensure that staff involved in adoption work have appropriate and sufficient skills, knowledge, access to training, experience, and appropriate supervision to deliver an effective and efficient service.
- To ensure that applicants for inter-country adoption receive appropriate counselling, advice, and information, and that such adopters are helped to progress appropriate preparation, assessment and matching services.

- To provide statutory services for children brought into the UK with an intention of adoption and who reside in Sunderland.
- To ensure that adopted people over the age of 18 receive appropriate counselling, advice, and information.
- To ensure regular review, monitoring and evaluation of services.

#### 4.0 Principles and standards of care

There is commitment to work in a single RAA across the geographical area, to achieve:

- A culture of early permanence planning in order to identify suitable adopters for children at the earliest possible stage during the care planning process to ensure the timeliness of the child moving in with their adoptive family.
- Marketing activity and recruitment of prospective adoptive families to meet the needs of the range of children, including Brother and Sister groups.
- Assessment and training of prospective adopters to a consistently high standard.
- Development of services across the range of adoption functions in the RAA through the capturing of stakeholder views and best regional and national practice.
- Matching, linking and adoption support that enables children to live in supportive and safe homes with their adoptive families.
- Pre and Post Adoption support tailored to meet the needs of the children and adoptive families and to deliver this as a consistent package of support across the RAA area.
- Effective and easily accessible Birth Family support.
- Access to consistent and responsive Intermediary Services.



## 4.1 Children

### Providing child-centred services through:

- Placing the child at the centre throughout their adoption journey, including into adulthood.
- Securing early permanence to prevent delay and achieve the best possible outcomes.
- Recognising the child's voice in permanence planning and ensuring communication is effective to enable them to understand their life narrative.
- Creating a sense of belonging for the child, in a secure permanent family and in the wider adoption community.
- Ensuring access to support at the level and time that it is needed.
- Ensuring sufficient adopters to promote the best possible match for the child.
- Children, birth parents/guardians and families and adoptive parents and families are respected and valued.
- Our service is non-discriminatory and anyone seeking to use the Adoption Service is treated with courtesy and respect, and their enquiry dealt with in a timely and sensitive manner.
- Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved. The Adoption Service will work in partnership with other organisations, professionals, and individuals to ensure that support services are available as needed to all parties in the adoption process – children, adopters, adopted adults and birth families.
- All parties to the adoption process will have access to the Agency's own complaints procedures and to external complaints mechanisms as set out in legislation, regulations, and guidance.

## 4.2 Prospective adopters

Giving a high-quality accessible service to adopters and potential adopters through:

- Ensuring applicants receive a sensitive, flexible, and welcoming service.
- Responding to enquiries from potential adopters in a timely manner.
- Giving prospective adopters clear, realistic, and timely feedback at all stages of their enquiry and application.
- Ensuring that adopters fully contribute to an evidence-based assessment, approval, and matching process.
- Providing consistent quality of adoption support that is relevant to individual adopter family's needs.
- Identifying and progressing potential matches at the earliest possible stage.
- Providing qualified, skilled, and experienced staff to support and guide adopters throughout their journey.
- Offering consistent, high quality, up to date training throughout, to enable adopters to understand the lifelong impact of adoption.

## 4.3 Adoptive parents

- Children will be matched with approved adopters who can offer them a stable and permanent home. Help and support will be provided to achieve a successful and lasting home.
- Approved adopters will be given clear information about the matching, introduction, and placement process, as well as any support to facilitate this that they may need.

- Before a match is agreed, adopters will be given full written information to help them understand the needs and background of the child. They will have an opportunity to discuss this information with the child's Social Worker, including the implications for them and their family and will be offered a meeting with the person responsible for completing the child's adoption health assessment.
- Adopters will be invited to a Child Appreciation Day for each child over the age of 2 years if that child is cared for by Together for Children Sunderland or cared for by another local authority who conduct such meetings.
- There will be access to a range of multi-agency support services before, during and after adoption. Support services will include practical help, professional advice, financial assistance where needed and information about local and national support groups and services.
- Adoptive parents will be involved in discussions as to how they can best maintain links, including contact, with birth relatives and significant others identified in the Adoption Support Plan. Adoptive parents will be supported in working with the child's contact plan.
- Adoptive parents will be encouraged to keep safe any information provided by birth families via agencies and to provide this to the adopted child age appropriately throughout their lives. Support to enable adoptive parents to discuss their adoption journey with the child will be available from the Adoption Service.
- Adoptive parents whose adopted child has decided to explore their birth heritage will be supported to deal with the impact of this decision.
- Where there are difficulties within the family, the agencies involved will cooperate to provide support and information to the adoptive parents and the child without delay.
- Adoptive parents will be informed of their right to make representations and complaints.

#### 4.4 Birth families

**Providing an accessible independent service for birth families and others affected by adoption which will include:**

- Support for birth family members whose children have a plan of adoption and enabling them, at any point, to contribute to the child's understanding of their life story.
- Intermediary services to birth family members and adopted adults.
- A Letterbox Service to facilitate ongoing positive Keeping In Touch between birth families and children.
- Facilitation of direct Keeping In Touch where this meets the child's needs.

**Adoption agencies must:**

- Ensure that children live with brothers and sisters wherever possible, within a timescale that is best for them and without unnecessary delay.
- Treat prospective adopters and adopters with openness, fairness, and respect.
- Make prospective adopters' first point of contact informative and welcoming.
- Via the hub approach adopter recruitment in the spirit of inclusiveness with a view to identifying potential and opportunity – no-one should be automatically excluded.
- Recruit prospective adopters who can meet all or most of the needs of children waiting for, or likely to need, adoption and signpost prospective adopters to other agencies if there is insufficient local demand.

- Explain to prospective adopters the needs and profiles of the children waiting to be adopted.
- Ensure preparation and training, the home study assessment, and approval process are explained and proceed efficiently.
- Regularly review progress on early linking and matching with prospective adopters being assessed and approved across the Adopt Coast to Coast geographical footprint. Link Maker is the chosen solution to achieve this.
- Provide adopters and prospective adopters with information, counselling, and support, as and when needed, throughout the adoption journey.
- Provide prospective adopters with information about the Independent Review Mechanism.
- Work in partnership across Adopt Coast to Coast, and with other agencies and the Courts, to ensure that all decisions are timely and joined-up.

**Adoptive parents must:**

- Be aware that adoption often brings challenges as well as joys.
- Be realistic about the needs of children awaiting adoption and accept that with support adopters may be able to consider adopting a child with a different profile to the child they originally envisaged.
- Make the most of opportunities to develop their parenting skills and seek support when needed at the earliest stage.
- Do all they can to enable their adopted child to feel loved, secure and to reach their potential.

**Objectives of the Adoption Service**

The Adoption Service as a partner in Adopt Coast to Coast is committed to achieving best outcomes through the continual development and delivery of a range of high-quality services via the Regional Adoption Agency. The Adoption Service continues to operate at a local “spoke” level, under the day-to-day co-ordination of the Head of Service and implement the agreed joint plans, policies and strategies as approved by the Governance Board.

The Adoption Service’s key objectives are:

- Ensure that children continue to live, with brothers and sisters wherever possible, within a timescale that is best for them and without unnecessary delay and are matched and move to live with prospective adopters who can meet most, if not all, of their assessed needs.
- To ensure that children live with prospective adopters where they are loved, feel safe and are safe, where their physical, emotional, and psychological health is promoted. Where they can enjoy their interests, develop confidence, and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Where they are supported to achieve their educational potential and where the education and achievements of children is valued and promoted.
- To ensure that contact with birth parents, brothers and sisters, other members of the birth family and significant others is arranged and maintained when it is beneficial to the child.
- To ensure that children have clear and appropriate information about themselves, their birth parents and families, and life before their adoption.
- To support birth parents and birth families to take an active part in the planning and implementation of their child’s adoption, wherever possible.
- To ensure that children and adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their adoption support needs and are provided with the services to meet those needs.

- To ensure that adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to their adoption, and where appropriate contact is facilitated between an adopted adult and their birth relatives if that is what both parties want.
- To ensure that the Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker make timely, quality, and appropriate recommendations/decisions in line with the over-riding objectives to promote the welfare of children throughout their lives.
- To ensure that children, prospective adopters, and adopters are clear about the aims and objectives of the Adoption Service and what service and facilities it provides.
- To ensure that children's cultural and identity needs are met by promoting equality and diversity in the approach with all service users.
- To ensure that The Adoption Service as a partner in Adopt Coast to Coast is informed and developed in accordance with the views of children, young people, and their birth and adoptive families.
- To ensure that children and service users receive a service from staff, managers, volunteers, panel members and decision-makers who are carefully selected, trained, supported, and managed to deliver an efficient and effective service.
- To ensure that allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support of children, the person making the allegation, and at the same time support the person who is subject of the allegation.
- To ensure that records are clear, accurate, up to date and stored securely, and contribute to an understanding of a child's life.

## **Adoption Services**

Adoption Services are provided to:

- Children and young people who are to be adopted.
- Birth parents of children whose plan is one of adoption.
- Prospective and approved adopters, including those who are seeking to adopt children from overseas.
- Children and their adoptive families who require adoption support services.
- Adopted adults and members of their birth families.



## 5.0 Organisational structures and functions

Outlined below are the current arrangements.

### 5.1 Staffing

A comprehensive Adoption Service to meet the needs of children, birth families, adoptive parents and adopted adults is planned corporately and provided in collaboration with other relevant agencies.

The Adoption Agency reports to the Together for Children Board.

The Cabinet Member for the Children and Young People's Service is Councillor Michael Butler.

The Chair of the Together for Children Board is Tammy Banks.

The **Responsible Individual** for the Adoption Service is Kathryn McCabe.

Together for Children Sunderland Adoption Service plans, commissions, and delivers services with local health and education bodies, voluntary adoption agencies, local courts and other relevant agencies, including where applicable other Local Authorities.

Services are compatible with Together for Children's Children in Care Strategy that seeks to improve outcomes of Cared For Children.

There is a range of policies for adoption, including post Adoption Services. Our policies and procedures in relation to adoption have been recently updated and are accessible via Sunderland Procedures Online.

Councillors carry out their responsibilities as corporate parents and will receive regular information on the management and outcomes of the service they are responsible for providing.

Senior managers, report to the Chief Executive Officer of Together for Children Sunderland and ensure that adoption is an integral part of services for children. They are involved in the strategic planning, delivery, and monitoring of the Adoption Service. The agency's performance and

key measures will be reported to Directorate Management Team (DMT) every six months.

### **Adoption Service location**

The Adoption Service is based at:  
Sandhill Centre  
Grindon Lane  
Sunderland  
SR3 4EN

## **5.2 Manager of the Adoption Service and Service Manager**

The Registered Manager for the Adoption Agency is Michelle Ash.

### **Registered Manager - Qualification and Experience**

The Registered Manager is responsible for overseeing the Adoption Agency. The Registered Manager is based at the Sandhill Centre and has direct operational responsibility for all parts of the Adoption Service including strategic planning, delivery of the service and performance management via quality assurance systems. The Registered Manager holds Diploma in Social Work and a BA Hons in Social Work.

Michelle Ash has experience of working within Adoption Services as a senior practitioner and since 2019 as the Registered Manager for the Adoption Service.

### **Service Manager - Qualifications and Experience**

The Service Manager is Daniel Kenny his credentials and qualifications are that he holds BSC Health and Social Care, an MA in Social Work and Level 5 Diploma Children's Management.

Daniel Kenny has experience of working within Adoption Services as a senior practitioner and Assistant Team Manager.

The Service Manager is responsible for the supervision, appraisal, training, and development of the Manager (Adoption Service), Team Manager

(Fostering Team), Team Managers Cared For teams 1 & 2 and the Team Manager Kinship Team.

### 5.3 Agency Decision Maker

The Agency Decision Maker for the service is Kathryn McCabe.

Kathryn McCabe is the Head of Service for Cared for Children, Together for Children Sunderland.

### 5.4 Adoption Support Services Adviser

The Service Manager of the Adoption Service (as above) acts as the Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA), delegating tasks as appropriate.

### 5.5. Staff employed for the purpose of the Adoption Service

Current staffing levels.

The current team consists of:

- Responsible Individual – Head of Service - Full time
- ADM – Head of Service – Full time
- Registered Manager and Panel Advisor – Full time
- Service Manager and Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) – Service Manager – Full time
- Head of Service for Adopt Coast to Coast (1 post) (F/T)
- Assistant Team Manager (1 posts) (F/T)
- Adoption Social Workers (4 posts) (F/T)
- Adoption Social Workers (4 posts) (.8 post)
- Adoption Social Workers (2 post) (.6 post)
  
- Administrator (Letterbox) (1 post) (1 x .5 posts)
- Senior Panel Administrator (1 posts) (.5 post)
- Team Administrator (1 post) (.5 post)

Team administrators and Panel administrators are centrally managed as part of the Together for Children Sunderland business support.

**Qualifications:** All Adoption Social Workers are professionally qualified (Diploma in Social Work/CQSW/BA Social Work), are registered with Social Work England and all but 2 members of the team have a minimum of three years' post qualification experience. The 2 members who do not have minimum experience are supervised by the Team Manager and mentored by the Assistant Team Manager. Some also have a post-qualifying award and/or are trained in Theraplay, Dyadic Development Psychotherapy (DPP) and Solihull Programme.

All Adoption Service staff are subject to the Together for Children Sunderland's policy on recruitment, staffing, equal opportunities, and discipline. All staff, including administration staff are subject to enhanced DBS checks.

### **Adopt Coast to Coast Governance Arrangements**

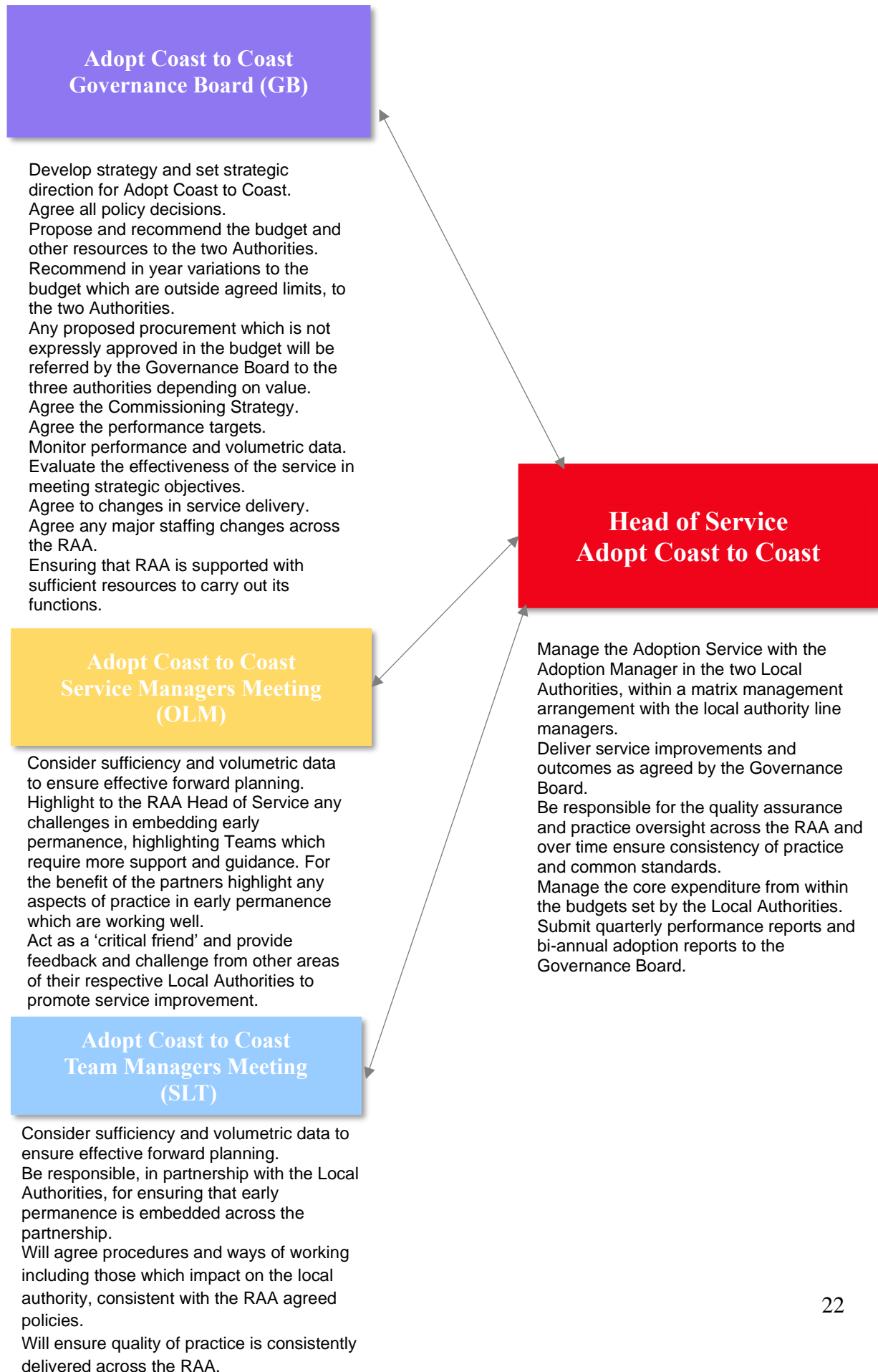
The Head of Service is accountable through a matrix management arrangement for the performance, service improvements and delivery of the agreed outcomes across the 2 spokes as detailed under the partnership arrangements. As lead for quality assurance across all aspects of adoption practice, the Head of Service will ensure the development of consistent practice to a set of agreed standards.

The Head of Service is accountable to the Governance Board and this accountability will be monitored through the receipt of quarterly performance reports and bi-annual adoption reports on behalf of the RAA.

The Head of Service will provide whole system leadership, influencing, leading and oversight of resources, (for example interagency spend) to deliver improved outcomes for Cared For Children with a plan of adoption in the spokes.

The Head of Service has a formal matrix management arrangement with the Adoption Team Manager in each spoke and their line manager.

The Head of Service has delegated authority to co-ordinate the activities of other Local Authority Officers who have identified responsibilities which support the partnership. The Head of Service through the Adoption Manager holds these officers to account for the discharge of their roles and functions in relation to the partnership, as prescribed by the Governance Board.



The Governance Board will meet every 3 months (as a minimum) and membership consists of:

- Directors of Children's Social Care or their nominated officers
- Head of Service
- Finance representative.
- Staff representative

The Governance Board will develop strategy and set strategic direction for Adopt Coast to Coast as detailed above.

Local Authority Members have a key role in ensuring that the RAA delivers good outcomes for Children and Young People. Their involvement and oversight will be as follows:

- Lead Members will meet with the Governance Board twice yearly to receive an update on progress and outcomes.
- Lead Members will receive regular briefings from their Directors of Children's Services.
- Corporate Parenting Boards will receive updates on the progress and outcomes of the RAA.
- Scrutiny panels will have oversight of the RAA as appropriate.

The Strategic Managers Meeting will be held on a 10 weekly basis and required membership is the strategic manager in each local authority and the RAA Head of Service.

The Service Managers Meeting will be held on an 8 weekly basis and required membership is the service lead for adoption in each local authority and the communications and Marketing Manager.

Invitations will be extended to others for example, IT, Performance, per agenda.

The Team Managers Meeting will meet on a 6 weekly basis and required membership are the Adoption Managers from each spoke and the

Communications and Marketing Manager. The meeting will be chaired by the Head of Service.

Invitations will be extended to others for example, Adoption Team Managers/Assistant Team Managers/Social Work Consultants, IT or Performance as per agenda.

On a 6 monthly basis the Strategic Managers will meet with the service and Team Managers to review progress and discuss the priorities for the next 6 months.

## 6.0 Services provided

The Adoption Service acts as a spoke in Adopt Coast to Coast recruitment, assessment, training and support services for prospective adopters, children adopted, members of the adoptive family, birth families and significant adults.

- The Adoption Social Workers' role includes the recruitment, training, and assessment, using the CoramBAAF Prospective Adopter Report (PAR). Adoption Social Workers also provide support and supervision for prospective adopters as well as providing support to children and families post adoption.
- Adoption Preparation training is delivered by staff from the Adoption Service, supported by professionals from across all disciplines working in the area of Cared For Children and by external providers.
- The Adoption Service ensures approved adopters are informed about children requiring forever families and support them in identifying suitable matches.
- The Social Workers also provide continued support to adopters once they have been approved. They are responsible for overseeing indirect contact between children and birth family members via the Letterbox Service.



- They have primary responsibility for family finding for those children for whom adoption is the plan, involving matching of the child's needs with the skills, abilities, and preferences of approved adopters.
- It is sometimes not appropriate for a child to live within the Sunderland area. Where a suitable match cannot be identified within Adopt Coast to Coast resources, prospective adopters approved or in stage 2 with the local RAA's and VAA's will be considered before commencing regional and then national searches.
- Child Appreciation' days are held for all children who are adopted who are usually over the age of 2 years, these meetings enable all professionals and carers of the children to be adopted can meet with the adopters and share all their knowledge of the children.
- The Adoption Service has 4 social workers trained in "Theraplay". Theraplay is a method of enhancing attachment, engagement, self-esteem, and trust in others. It is based on the natural patterns of healthy interaction between parent and child, is personal, physically engaging, and fun. It is a type of parent-child psychotherapy used in a variety of settings. Where it is identified as a need, this kind of support is available to some children placed with adopters.
- The Service also has 9 social workers trained in DDP Level 1 and 3 social workers trained in DDP level 2.
- Prospective adopters participate fully in the matching and introduction planning process for each child.
- Where there are any disruptions during or after the introduction period a disruption meeting is held to consider all contributing factors and to plan for the future needs of children, adoptive families, and birth families. Clear guidance on the purpose and arranging of this meeting is detailed in the Guidance on Disruption of Adoptive Placements is available.

- Services for birth families are provided by the children and young people locality teams and the Adoption Service and under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with PAC-UK.
- Birth families are provided with post adoption counselling via a Service Level Agreement with PAC-UK. They are supported with both indirect and direct contact arrangements through the Letterbox Service provided by the Adoption Service.
- The Adoption Service encourages all parties to adoption to use the services provided by the Post Adoption Centre (London) [www.pac.uk](http://www.pac.uk) which offers an information and advice service.
- Should any allegations be made about approved adopters they can be provided with independent support, funded by Together for Children Sunderland.
- Together for Children Sunderland offers out of office emergency social work support to all service user groups.

## 6.1 Letterbox Coordinator

The Letterbox Coordinator manages the Letterbox Service and helps birth relatives and adopters to develop a positive exchange of information. This includes sending out reminders to adopters and birth parents that a letterbox exchange is due. The social workers within the service check all items received and prepare scanned copies of the information to be kept on file.

- Social workers from the Adoption Service are involved in the preparation training of prospective adopters and ensure that they are both aware and conversant with the letterbox system in Sunderland.
- Social workers from the Adoption Service provide support and advice to children's social workers in relation to contact planning.

## 6.2 Adoption Panel

### **Independent Chair of the Adoption Panel**

The Independent Chair is an experienced social work manager who has worked in the area of adoption/ fostering/ Cared For Children/ residential services since 2001.

### **Adoption Panel Adviser: Michelle Ash**

Michelle Ash is an experienced social worker and manager, who has, since qualifying in 2000 worked in the areas of child protection and adoption. Michelle has extensive experience and knowledge of working to develop early permanence planning.

### **Information re: experience and qualifications**

All Adoption Service providers are legally required to have an Adoption Panel. Adoption Panels have an independent role separate from the Adoption Service provider.

Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Service has established two Adoption Panels. The Adoption Panels, Red and Blue meet twice each month. Additional Emergency Panel meetings are arranged where required particularly to avoid any significant delay for a child.

The Adoption Panel works within the same principles and standards of service as the Adoption Agency. Additionally:

- The Panel will take an active role in maintaining the quality of standards of Adoption Services.
- Involvement of children, families and applicants will be maximised.

The key role of the Adoption Panel is to provide independent scrutiny of the proposals presented and to determine whether:

- All the issues have been clarified.
- The proposal is sound.

The Panel can then make a recommendation about the following:

- Recommending whether a prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child.
- Recommending the “match” between a child and a particular prospective adopter.
- Adoption Panel is involved in cases where there is no court scrutiny of the adoption plan because birth parents agree with it. In such cases the CPR will be presented to the Adoption Panel for consideration and recommendation.

The Adoption Panel also provides advice regarding:

- The provision of adoption support for particular adoptive families.
- The number of children the prospective adopter may be suitable to adopt, their age range, gender, likely needs and background.
- The arrangements for allowing any person contact with a particular child.
- Whether the parental responsibility of any parent, guardian or the prospective adopter should be restricted for a particular child, and if so, the extent of any such restriction.

Details of the Adoption Panel’s membership are available in booklet form. All Panel members are required to sign a Panel Member’s Agreement.

The Panel Adviser and the ADM will undertake the annual appraisal of the Panel Chair.

An experienced Panel Administrator supports the work of the Panel.

See Appendix 1.

### 6.3 Adoption support services

We understand that children moving to live with their forever families is only the beginning. Supporting the Family and recognising the ongoing needs of the adopted person alongside those of their birth and adoptive families is equally important.

There is a statutory responsibility to provide an Adoption Support Plan for every child placed for adoption. The plan must cover the support needs of the child together with those of the adoptive family.

The following information outlines our current arrangements, and the services provided.

In Sunderland the responsibility for drawing up the plan lies with the child's Family Finding social worker with support from the child's Social Worker. The format used for the assessment and drafting of the Support Plan is the CoramBAAF document.

This covers the following key areas:

- Health
- Education
- Emotional and behavioural development
- Identity
- Financial and resources support
- Social presentation
- Self-care skills
- Contact

### 6.4 Post Approval and Post Adoption support

The Adoption Service offers a range of post-approval and post adoption support for people who have been adopted, birth families and adopters. We prioritise resources focused on maintaining the relationship between an adoptive child and their adoptive family.

- Adoption support services are provided to adoptive families approved by Adopt Coast to Coast before and after placement.
- The Adoption Service will liaise with the child's Social Worker to ensure that any additional services required, such as therapeutic support, is identified, assessed and an appropriately qualified provider is identified to deliver the service.
- Support services are also provided to adoptive families (including those children within families) living in the Sunderland area that meet the criteria for adoption support services.
- Following approval, adopters continue to be supported by their allocated Adoption Social Worker, who assists them in identifying a suitable match with a child/children awaiting adoption.
- The Adoption Social Worker remains allocated to the family until an Adoption Order is made and beyond if required.
- Prospective adoptive parents and children placed with them are entitled to support from services for Cared For Children, whilst the child is living with them, prior to an Adoption Order being granted.
- The Adoption Service offers a range of training to adopters to increase their knowledge and understanding on subjects including Caring For Children who have been Sexually Abused, Managing Challenging Behaviour, Developing Secure Attachments and Valuing Diversity.

Adoption preparation training is delivered by staff from the Adoption Services across the 2 spokes, supported by professionals from across all disciplines working in the area of Cared For Children and by external providers. Currently the Adoption preparation training is hosted every month shared between Together for Children Sunderland and Durham Adoption Services.

Leaflets advising of the range of services offered are freely available.

- Leaflets advising of the range of services offered are available to adopters and information can be shared and discussed with social workers from the Adoption Service.
- When therapeutic or other adoption support services are identified as needed and are not available from universal services or services for Cared For Children, spot-purchase funding can be available and funded through the ASF or Together for Children Sunderland.
- Assistance is given to access mainstream education services and to ensure all appropriate arrangements have been made for the child's education, prior to the granting of the Order.
- Assistance is also given to support prospective adopters to promote the child's participation in leisure activities and trips.
- Support with the planned future contact arrangements is considered and reviewed as part of the child's Adoption Support Plan.
- Adopters can attend support groups such as "Crafty Kids" a bi monthly session attended by adopters and children. There is also a support group that meets bi-monthly for training and discussion. Information about the groups is provided to all adopters.
- Together for Children Sunderland provides adoption allowances, where required, to ensure the adopters can care for the child. The allowance is paid weekly and is child needs-led, means tested and is subject to annual review or with any changes in circumstances.
- Adopters are encouraged to participate in a range of activities that take place for all adopter families during school holidays. This promotes a sense of belonging within the service, and children in care, birth children and adopters all appreciate the opportunity to socialise with each other.
- The Adoption Service operates a confidential Letterbox Service, providing safe and proactive contact arrangements for the exchange of information between adoptive families and birth families. The

Adoption Service can hold information from birth families and people who have been adopted which can be exchanged with agreement.

- Where adopted people, under the age of 18, seek further information and possible contact with their birth family, the Adoption Service offers counselling and other appropriate services. This is usually in conjunction with the adoptive family.
- Where adopted people over the age of 18 ask for further information and possible contact with their birth family, the Adoption Service offers counselling and acts as an intermediary. The Adoption Service strongly supports the National Adoption Contact Register so that all parties to an adoption can record their mutual willingness to be approached. An intermediary service will be available when a link has been made on the register.
- Where birth families contact the Adoption Service seeking further information and possible contact, we will act as an intermediary if the whereabouts of the adult who has been adopted are known.

## 7.0 Staff supervision, development and training

- Our Supervision Policy is in place; members of staff receive regular supervision and annual Performance and Development Reviews (PDRs) to identify professional training and development needs.
- Adoption Panel members have annual appraisals completed by the Panel Chair and the Panel Adviser.
- Staff supervision covers professional practice, learning and development, reflection on specific issues and cases, caseload discussion, monitoring of professional service delivery and agreeing actions.
- Regular adoption training is available to and provided for all staff and Panel members and this can focus on the training needs of an individual or team. Training is arranged with suitable providers and



can also cover changes to legislation or developments within adoption.

Together for Children Sunderland also subscribes to Coram BAAF an organisation that can provide practice and research literature as well as publicity about children needing adoptive families throughout the UK and training.

## 8.0 Process for recruiting, preparing, assessing, and approving prospective adopters

The following is a summary of the procedure for recruitment, preparation, assessment, and approval of adopters. All timescales comply with the relevant regulations.

### 8.1 Recruitment

The recruitment is managed by the hub through a dedicated Marketing and Communications Manager working closely with Communications leads in each of the spokes. The recruitment activity is supported by a website, and Facebook page. An online enquiry form is available on the website and the dedicated Adopt Coast to Coast telephone number is answered by experienced call centre staff within Durham County Council. The performance and ongoing training needs will be monitored and met by the hub. The recruitment activity is supported by a dedicated budget and a recruitment strategy.

The recruitment activity will be influenced by management information on children, (numbers referred, gender, ages, groups of brothers and sisters, children's needs etc.) to inform, prioritise and target recruitment to meet the needs of children across Adopt Coast to Coast requiring adoption.

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

Adopt Coast to Coast recognises the value in attracting applicants from diverse backgrounds. Advertising material and written information are designed to highlight children's needs for safe and stable parenting whilst

emphasising that enquiries and applications are encouraged from people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

The marketing approach to adoption recruitment seeks to raise public awareness of the needs of children and the rewards and challenges of adoptive parenting. Recruitment activity and preparation groups will be coordinated regionally to maximise opportunities for prospective adopters to commence their journey with Adopt Coast to Coast.

With the support of the hub, Together for Children and Durham Adoption Services hold regular information events and offer the opportunity to speak to a duty officer without a prior appointment. The information events have been virtual since 2021, and to maintain the flexibility of an evening and a weekend morning each month they will continue to be offered via Microsoft Teams. Information events provide opportunities for enquirers to talk to experienced Adoption Social Workers and adoptive parents.

### **Initial enquiry**

People who wish to enquire about adoption can access information from the website and then complete an online enquiry form. Once this is received an Adoption Social Worker will contact the enquirer to begin to gather information. A decision will then be made by both parties whether to proceed with an initial visit.

### **Initial visit**

Initial visits are undertaken to prospective adopter within 2 weeks of receipt of the enquiry subject to the availability of the enquirer. This is an exploratory session to enable a two-way sharing of information. Once a Registration of Interest form is received The Team Manager will decide on whether to accept it or not. Where it is accepted the enquirers move into Stage 1 of the adoption journey. In cases where it is not accepted the enquirer will be given the reason for this decision in writing.

## **Stage 1**

### **Checks, References and Medicals**

The assessment of a prospective adopter's suitability will take account of a range of safeguarding and vetting processes designed to protect children from harm, abuse, or exploitation.

All adoptive applicants are required to provide proof of identity and to give written consent to a comprehensive range of enquiries, checks, reports, and references being obtained by the Adoption Service from other organisations or individuals. The requirement for Enhanced DBS checks applies to all residents in the prospective adopters' household who are 16 years or over. Applicants are required to consent to medical information being provided following a medical examination.

### **Information Counselling and Preparation**

During Stage 1, prospective adopters are required to participate in a series of group preparation sessions where possible. The preparation sessions will be offered monthly; facilitated by Together for Children and Durham jointly. Topics included in the information, counselling, and preparation training programme are as follows:

- Why children need adoption
- Parenting/adoptive parenting tasks
- Separation and loss
- Attachment and bonding
- Communicating with children
- Adoption triangle
- Prospective adopter assessment process and requirements
- Role of the Adoption Panel applicants' attendance
- Medical and background issues affecting children's development/behaviour
- Managing behaviour
- Safe care and caring for an abused child
- Life story work and preparation of children for placement
- Case studies for approval and matching of children
- Introductions of child into adoptive placement
- Contact issues
- Talking to a child about adoption
- Post placement issues and adoption support
- Legal requirements

- Rights/needs of adopted adults-access to records
- Concurrent Planning and Fostering for Adoption

The groups are led by experienced Adoption Social Workers with the assistance of social work colleagues, other professionals, and experienced adopters. The groups provide an opportunity for those attending to increase their knowledge and understanding of the lifelong implications of adoption for all involved.

Additional opportunities for learning are available following attendance at preparation groups. This is facilitated by meeting other adoptive parents; use of the adoption team's resources includes a range of books/DVDs on childcare and adoption issues as well as access to the varied programme of training available to both adopters and foster carers.

Once all references and checks are received and the mandatory training is completed, the Team Manager will review the application and decide if the prospective adopter can proceed to Stage 2. If the applicants are suitable to proceed, they have up to 6 months from receiving the letter notifying them of this to return their completed Stage 2 agreement. If the Stage 2 agreement is not received within the 6 months deadline, the prospective adopters would have to start from Stage 1 should they wish to continue their interest in adopting.

If the prospective adopter is not suitable to proceed, they will receive a letter to this effect stating the Agency's reasons. There is no formal appeal at this stage, however Together for Children's complaints process could be utilised.

## Stage 2

### **Assessment and Approval of Prospective Adopters**

On receipt of the signed Stage 2 agreement, the allocated Adoption Social Worker would complete the assessment. This must be considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) within 4 months.

At the commencement of Stage 2, the prospective adopter will be given the opportunity to register with Link Maker and create a profile. This is not a requirement; however, it will more easily support the practice for early

linking and matching. The Adoption Social Worker will offer support and guidance.

Applicants will also be offered the opportunity to attend the 2 day Early Permanence Training as well as the Practice and Principles of Theraplay training as well as Paediatric First Aid Training.

Applicants are encouraged wherever possible/practicable to make their own written contribution to the assessment. Self-evaluation combined with professional evaluation and judgement is crucial to the assessment and decision-making process.

Completed assessments are presented to one of the Adoption Panels for a recommendation and the minutes of the Panel along with the assessment paperwork are considered by the ADM in coming to their decision.

Applicants are invited to attend the Adoption Panel and are informed verbally and in writing of the outcome of their application.

If the Panel recommendation is that the prospective adopter is not suitable to adopt a child, a 'qualifying determination' letter will be sent by the ADM. The applicant can request a review either by the Agency or the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). Full information on this and the decision-making process is available in the Adoption Team's Policies and Procedures.

## 8.2 Adoption Panel – approval of adopters

- The completed assessment is presented to the Adoption Panel by the Adoption Social Worker.
- Applicants are invited and encouraged to attend the Panel meeting.
- The Panel discusses the content of the assessment and asks any questions it has before reaching a recommendation.
- The independent Panel chair will inform the applicant/s of the recommendation/s about suitability to adopt.

- The recommendation(s) are then considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) who makes a final decision on behalf of the agency.
- All applicants are notified verbally, and in writing, of the Panel's recommendation/s and of the ADM's decisions.
- **Appeal:** Where the decision is that applicants are not considered suitable to adopt a child (a qualifying determination), applicants are informed in writing, giving reasons for the decision.

Applicants have 40 working days to decide whether to:

- Accept the decision and withdraw OR
- Make representations to the Agency Decision Maker OR
- Apply to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).
- Where applicants make representations to the ADM or the IRM, the final decision will be made by the ADM.
- If applicants are still dissatisfied, they may use Together for Children Sunderland complaints system.

## 9.0 Monitoring and reviewing the service.

Various processes are in place to monitor and review the service:

- Children's permanency plans and adoption plans are monitored by the Independent Reviewing Officers, Team Managers, Service Managers and by an audit system.
- The Adoption Panel monitors those children who are approved for adoption but have not yet found their forever family within a 6-month period.
- After each Panel a questionnaire will be sent to all attendees, seeking their views and feedback. The outcome of these questionnaires will be incorporated into the Panel annual report and discussed at the Annual Business Meeting.
- Each member of the Adoption Panel receives an annual appraisal, and the general outcomes of these appraisals are reported back to the Panel.
- The quality of reports is monitored by the Adoption Panel and reported to the agency every six months.
- The agency's performance, numbers of adopters approved, numbers of children approved and time scales for children's progress through the adoption system is reported to the Senior Management Team every six months, and to the Department for Education annually via the Adoption and Special Guardian Leadership Board (ASG) Return.
- Statistical information relating to the number, location and type of referrals received via the Adopt Coast to Coast hub and is analysed and informs our recruitment strategy.
- Preparation and training courses for adopters are regularly evaluated and the activities of the Adoption Panel are evaluated. These evaluations are used to develop the service.

- All employee files are audited to ensure compliance and that all relevant checks are up to date.
- The Statement of Purpose is reviewed by members of the agency and Together for Children Board.

**Numbers of adopters, children placed for adoption and adoption support provided.**

Adopt Coast to Coast on behalf of Together for Children Adoption is committed to recruiting a range of adopters who will meet the needs of the children and young people who require adoption.

Prospective Adopters come from a wide variety of backgrounds and the hub aims to recruit carers from all cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. This enables Adopt Coast to Coast to match their prospective adopters with the specific identified needs of the children and young people requiring permanence via adoption.

Where prospective adopters cannot be found locally to meet the needs of children with a plan of adoption, adopters are sought countrywide through Link maker to ensure that children are placed with their forever family without delay.

Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025

- A total of 21 adoption households were approved,
- 22 children were approved suitable for adoption with 17 children matched with prospective adopters,
- 23 children received their Adoption Order



## 10.0 Complaints, allegations, and compliments

Together for Children Sunderland welcomes complaints, comments, and suggestions about services from service users, their families, carers or representatives. The complaints procedure recognises the vulnerability of complainants and the need to resolve complaints at the most informal level possible. The Adoption Service encourages feedback from people (including children) about the service they received. With partners in Adopt Coast to Coast the Head of Service will lead on monitoring and quality assurance as detailed earlier in the Adopt Coast to Coast Governance arrangements section. This feedback is then used to inform future service planning and any “lessons learned” are communicated to relevant staff:

- All Cared For Children who make a complaint can be provided with the services of an advocate via the IRO service.
- A “Children’s Guide to Adoption” (“Your Guide to Adoption”) is given to every child placed for adoption (or, dependent on the child’s age and level of understanding, to their prospective adopter) and includes the telephone number of the Independent Reviewing Officer and of OFSTED.
- We encourage adoptive parents to help their children to participate in any consultation opportunities.
- Adopters, prospective adopters, and birth families are clearly entitled to use, and are made aware of, the complaints procedure if they feel they cannot resolve a difficulty with the individuals concerned or their managers.
- Adoption Service staff are knowledgeable about the complaints procedure and comprehensive guidance is available on how to handle complaints.

## 10.1 The complaints procedure

- The complaints procedure has two stages, formal and informal.
- Informal complaints are usually dealt with by the Manager of the Service concerned, and as quickly as possible.
- If the complaint is serious, or if someone is not satisfied by the action taken by the manager, the complaint can be registered as a formal complaint.
- An Investigation Officer, who is not directly involved in providing the service, will be appointed. The complaint will be acknowledged within seven days, and we will respond to the complaint within 28 days. If we are unable to do this, we will advise the complainant and agree a timetable for a full response.
- If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome, they have 28 days to ask the Complaints Reviewing Officer for the Department's response to be reviewed. An Independent Review Panel will be held within 28 days of that request. The Panel will consist of three people, one of whom will be 'independent' of the local authority.
- This person will Chair the Panel. The complainant will be sent the recommendations of the Panel within 24 hours of the decision being made. Complainants also have the right to contact their local Councillor or Member of Parliament.
- Applicants to become adopters, who are not accepted for approval on the recommendation of the Adoption Panel and/or the decision maker, are able to ask for their case to be reviewed by the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). Details of this process are made available to applicants during preparation and assessment. Information is available on the IRM from their website [www.independentreviewmechanism.org.uk](http://www.independentreviewmechanism.org.uk) or via email [irm@irm.org.uk](mailto:irm@irm.org.uk) or by telephone on 0845 450 3956
- The IRM has the following timescales:

- ✓ Applicants have 40 days from the agency decision to contact the IRM.
- ✓ The Adoption Agency will be contacted to produce relevant documents within 10 days.
- ✓ The IRM will set up a panel within 3 months of the application.

## 10.2 Adoption Panel complaints and representations

Any complaint specifically about the Adoption Panel should be directed to the Panel Adviser or Chair in the first instance, to assist resolution. If the matter cannot be resolved at stage one, then the usual complaints procedure for Together for Children Sunderland will be used.

In the event that someone wishes to make a complaint they may contact:

Tel: 0191 561 7997

Email: [complaints.children@sunderland.gov.uk](mailto:complaints.children@sunderland.gov.uk)

## 10.3 Registration information

### **Name and Address of Registration Authority:**

OFSTED

National Business Unit

Piccadilly Gate

Store St

Manchester

M1 2WD

Telephone: 0300 123 123

Voluntary Adoption Agencies are inspected by Ofsted at least once in a three-year cycle.

All adoption agencies are requested to complete an annual adoption quality assurance and data form. This data is used to inform inspections and to help Ofsted to decide whether an inspection is required within the coming year's cycle. The annual cycle is between 1 April and 31 March each year.

Ofsted, the government office for standards in education, children's services, and skills, found Together for Children's Voluntary Adoption Agency to be Good across all areas.

The Ofsted report for adoption states that:

- Adoptive families benefit from the wraparound service provided by a long-standing and stable staff team. This is a particular strength of the agency as there is continuity of support available to adoptive families from the first point of contact through to post-adoption assistance.
- Early permanence is promoted by the agency when there is a plan of adoption for children. The adoption team works closely with Together for Children Sunderland social work teams to search for, and identify, prospective adopters. Children benefit from an increased pool of adopters through the agency being part of a regional adoption agency. Strong tracking systems and 'children waiting' meetings show the tenacity and ongoing efforts that the staff make to seek the right permanent families for children.
- Adopters who approach the agency feel welcomed and are dealt with sensitively by staff. Adopters spoke of feeling understood and not judged. Communication is clear and adopters feel able to ask any questions. Their positive experience has led to adopters being strong advocates for others interested in adoption.
- The agency recognises the importance of the adopter's family and friends in the preparation and matching stages of the process. The addition of the 'family network' meetings include family and friends in the planning. This gives the agency an extra layer of reassurance that prospective adopters have the necessary support that they need when children move in with them.
- Adopters and prospective adopters have access to a wide range of training, which includes different aspects of safeguarding children. Adopter training also focuses on therapeutic parenting and enables adopters to understand and respond to children with complex experiences of trauma. As children grow and develop, adopters are

supported to understand the potential risks, such as exploitation, through bespoke training.

- The adoption team is passionate about its roles, and aspirational about the agency. There is a stable, experienced, and knowledgeable staff team that is child-focused and keen to achieve the best outcomes for children.

Ofsted praises creative, innovative, and proactive ways in which support is provided to adoptive families and their children and how the agency is able to place children with their adoptive families in a timely manner with successful use of Early Permanence planning.

#### 10.4 Allegations

Any complaint, allegation or concern about a child involving possible injury or harm to a child, including historical complaints, will be investigated within the existing Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board Procedures.

## Appendix 1

### Membership of Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Panels

#### Central list

Panel members are drawn from a list of people whom it is considered have the appropriate qualifications and/or experiences to consider cases submitted to the Adoption Panel.

There is no limit to the number of people who are on the central list and the same people do not have to be appointed to every Panel.

Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Service will decide how many Panel members should sit on each Panel meeting, subject to the Panel meeting being "quorate" (a certain number of people need to be present for the meeting to go ahead). Panel business can only be conducted if there are at least 5 members present, including the Chair or Vice Chair and the Adoption Social Worker. Where the Vice Chair has to chair the meeting and is not an independent, at least one independent member must be present for the Panel to be quorate.

The Panel should not be so large so that it is difficult to chair and could be seen as rather overwhelming to prospective adopters attending the meeting.

The central list in Sunderland includes:

- A Chairperson – an independent person with the necessary skills and experience.
- Eight social workers, each with at least three years' relevant post qualifying experience in childcare social work, including direct experience in adoption work. The social workers do not need to be employed by the agency.
- The Medical Advisers– will have expertise in child health and health related issues.

- Other persons – “independent members”, including where practicable at least two persons with personal experience of adoption. This could include specialists in education, child and adolescent mental health, race, and culture and those who have personal experience of adoption.
- Additionally, a Legal Adviser to the Panel will be identified, who may or may not be a Panel member. The Legal Adviser is a qualified solicitor who is well experienced in child and family law and is also a member of the Law Society’s Children’s Panel.

### **Agency Adviser to the Adoption Panels**

The Agency Adviser to the Adoption Panels is a senior member of staff with at least five years’ relevant post-qualifying experience and relevant management experience.

The Agency Adviser is not a Panel member but should attend Panel meetings. Where necessary another Agency Adviser will deputise.

### **Vice Chair of the Panels**

One members of the Central List have been appointed as Vice Chair, with responsibility for acting as the Panel Chair if the Chairperson is absent or the appointment is vacant.

## Appendix 2

### Glossary

Please see below explanation of some of the abbreviations and terms used in the Together for Children Sunderland Adoption Statement of Purpose:

ADM	This means the <b>Agency Decision Maker</b> , who makes decisions about adoption following recommendations by the Adoption Panel.
Adoption UK	<b>Adoption UK</b> is a national charity run by and for adopters, which provides self-help information, advice, support and training on all areas of adoption and adoptive parenting.
Coram BAAF	<b>Coram BAAF</b> is a national organisation that works with everyone involved with adoption and fostering in the UK.
IRM	This is the <b>Independent Review Mechanism</b> that applies if a prospective adopter wants to ask for an independent review of a decision made by an Adoption Agency about their approval.
ARC Adoption	<b>ARC Adoption North East</b> provides a range of adoption support to Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Service under a Service Level Agreement. Services included are independent birth parent support and adoptive parents buddying system.