

TITLE OF REPORT: Overview of Performance and Activity of the Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency 2020/21

REPORT OF: Deputy Strategic Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of the Performance and Activity of Adopt Northeast in relation to Gateshead children.

Introduction

1. This Overview Report provides a summary of developments for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, the second full operational year of Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency.

Background

2. Adopt North East is a shared service arrangement between Gateshead Council, Newcastle City Council, Northumberland County Council, North Tyneside Council and South Tyneside Council. The partnership was created in response to a legal requirement established by the Education and Adoption Act 2016 that Local Authorities cease local provision of adoption services and instead share delivery on a regional basis.

3. In the Summer of 2018, the respective Cabinets of all five partner Local Authorities agreed to the formation of Adopt North East as a single Adoption Agency which would operate across the geographical area of the partners and delegated the statutory adoption functions of each Local Authority to it.

4. On 1 December 2018, Adopt North East became operational, working to the vision and ambition established by the five partners to achieve '*excellent adoption services that transform children's and families lives for the better*'.

5. As a consequence of regionalisation, since December 2018 Adopt North East has had responsibility for recruiting, assessing, and supporting prospective adopters, for non-Adopt agency work and intercountry adoptions and primary

responsibility for family finding for all children with adoption plans from the five partner Local Authorities.

6. Additionally, Adopt North East is responsible for providing support to all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives.

Overview of Performance

7. As we know, 2020/2021 was dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic which impacted all work aspects of the Adopt North East. As the Adopt North East provides services for children, adoptive families and those affected by adoption required by law, these could not be suspended.

8. Adopt North East therefore 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, was the transition from face-to-face assessment and support to alternative delivery methods, principally a move online. Whilst undoubtedly challenging, Adopt North East can report considerable success in doing so.

9. An example would be the continued operation of its Adoption Panel, without which children in the care of its partner Local Authorities would be unable to move children onto permanency with their forever families. Within days of the lockdown, Adopt North East moved to a virtual Panel and continued to ensure that timely decisions for children were made, and families found.

10. 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.

11. Despite the challenges presented by Covid, 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 evidence that Adopt North East has not only maintaining services but in fact significantly exceeding the performance achieved in the previous year.

12. During its second full year of operation, between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, Adopt North East has on behalf of its five partner Local Authorities:

- 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 Potential of Regionalisation

13. The 2019/2020 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, this Overview Report repeats this assertion.

14. The first year of operation was very much about the formation of Adopt North East as a provider of adoption services, then its second year has been very much about consolidation, Covid-19 notwithstanding.

15. Adopt North East has particularly benefitted from securing a full, permanent staff team, ending its use of agency Social Workers and carrying no vacancies. It has also focused on the development and refinement of its operating model, underpinned by clear policies and procedures and the establishment of a robust performance management framework.

16. Whilst Adopt North East 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 increased use of Early Permanence Placements, the hosting of Activity Days to find families for children who have additional complexity, the effective commissioning of over £1.2 million of nationally funded 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.

Areas for Development

17. There are undoubted areas for development for the partnership. Adopt North East 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. 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.

18. Accordingly, it is a strategic priority of Adopt North East to become sufficient. Work by the RAA National Leaders Group suggests an average reported sufficiency nationally of 69%, whilst of the three established Regional Adoption Agencies within the North East, Adopt North East is the highest performing at 73% (Adopt Tees Valley 63% and Adopt Coast to Coast at 56%).

19. 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 to improve sufficiency.

20. Another significant area of development is that Adopt North East 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.

21. Likewise, Adopt North East 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 Adopt North East to become a more effective learning organisation – that provides the roadmap for the third year of operation. Following formation and consolidation, Adopt North East will now very much turn to strengthening its quality of practice.

Celebrating Progress

22. Finally, it is often difficult to summarise in a brief report an entire year let alone communicate the difference Adopt North East makes to those with whom we work. However, an adoptive couple kindly decided to summarise their reflections in writing and these reflections perhaps best illustrate the progress made by Adopt North East :-

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.

Recommendations

23. OSC is asked to note the contents of the report.

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