

Thinking about adoption, but not sure where to start...

...Start your journey with
Gateshead Council

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September 2017



Adoption Service Annual Report

adopt with
Gateshead



INTRODUCTION

It gives us great pleasure to introduce Gateshead Council's 2016/17 Adoption Service Annual Report. As Cabinet Member for Children and Young People in Gateshead and Chief Executive/Interim Strategic Director of Care, Wellbeing and Learning we hold the responsibility to ensure that children requiring adoption receive good quality services which will support them. Achieving positive outcomes for children and the provision of effective support for all those affected by adoption is a crucial component of the work of the Adoption Service and fits well within the strategic vision for Gateshead, Vision 2030, which sets out targets for the improvement of the lives of Gateshead residents. This Annual Report provides a summary of the performance of the Adoption Service during the past year. It also includes analysis and comparative data for 2016/17, highlighting progress made over the past year and identifying potential areas for future development in the year ahead.

The Service continues to operate against a backdrop where major structural and procedural reform is being proposed. One of the key challenges for the Service in the forthcoming year will be to ensure the continuing provision of effective services for adoptive families and children requiring adoption, whilst also managing the impact of significant changes for both

the Service and its staff. The Adoption Team has always been committed to doing its best to secure positive outcomes for children and young people and for a small percentage of children, the most effective way to achieve this will be through the provision of new permanent families.

This year we will focus on:

- Attracting potential adopters from within a 50 mile radius of Gateshead and increasing enquiries.
- Exploring opportunities for continued collaborative working with other local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies in order to maximise placement choices for children.
- Evaluating and developing the existing post adoption support offer and maximising use of the Adoption Support Fund.
- Continuing to develop "foster to adopt" opportunities.
- Managing the changes and requirements of the Adoption Reform Agenda and the implications of the "regionalisation of adoption" which requires all local authorities in England to move to delivering adoption services on a regional basis.
- Monitoring our performance and systems to effectively analyse outcomes and identify potential areas for future service development.

We would like to thank all the members of the Adoption Panel and their commitment during the past year and all the staff, from within the Council and other organisations, for their continued hard work in making adoption a positive outcome for many children in Gateshead.

We thank you all for everything you do... every day.



Councillor Angela Douglas
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People



Sheena Ramsey
Chief Executive and Interim Strategic Director of Care, Wellbeing and Learning

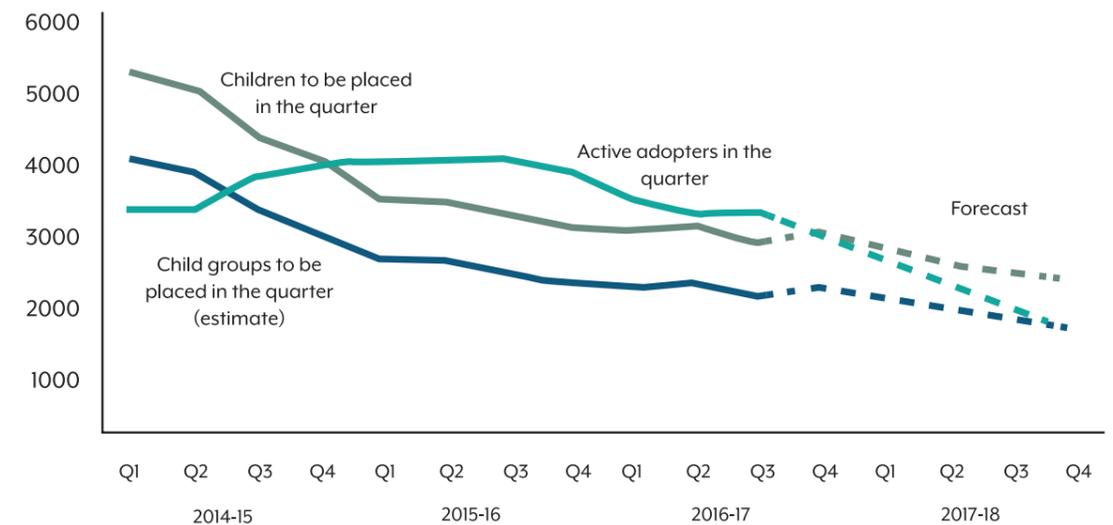
Background

In April 2017 the National Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) published a paper collating data recently gathered from local authority adoption agencies in England. The purpose of this research was to identify current trends in adoption and to provide estimates as to the future numbers of children likely to require adoptive placements and the number of adoptive families potentially available to meet that need.

The ALB model suggests that at any point in time between January and March this year there were approximately just fewer than 3,000 children requiring an adoptive placement with about the same number of approved adoptive families currently active at the same time. The model anticipates a continuing rise in the number of children requiring adoption alongside a corresponding fall in the number of available adoptive families.

If these projections are correct, this will represent the end of a period (since January 2015) of there being more approved adoptive families available than children needing to be placed. Should current trends continue, the number of approved families available in any given quarter will continue to fall faster than the number of children needing to be placed, and will have significant implications in relation to the Service's future recruitment and family-finding strategies.

Projected number of adopters and children to be placed (and child groups, counting siblings as one) in England



56% of the children waiting for adoption as at December 31 2016 were part of a sibling group, whilst the preference of the majority of prospective adopters during the same period appears to have been for a single child.

In reality, only a proportion of the 2,160 children identified in the table above as "waiting" to be placed are actually waiting, as this overall figure includes children who have been matched to adoptive families and not yet placed, together with children who have previously been identified as requiring adoption but where the plan has subsequently changed.

An estimated 1,220 children do not fall into either of these categories and therefore this will be the more representative figure for the number of children for whom English local authorities were actively seeking adoptive families at the end of 2016.

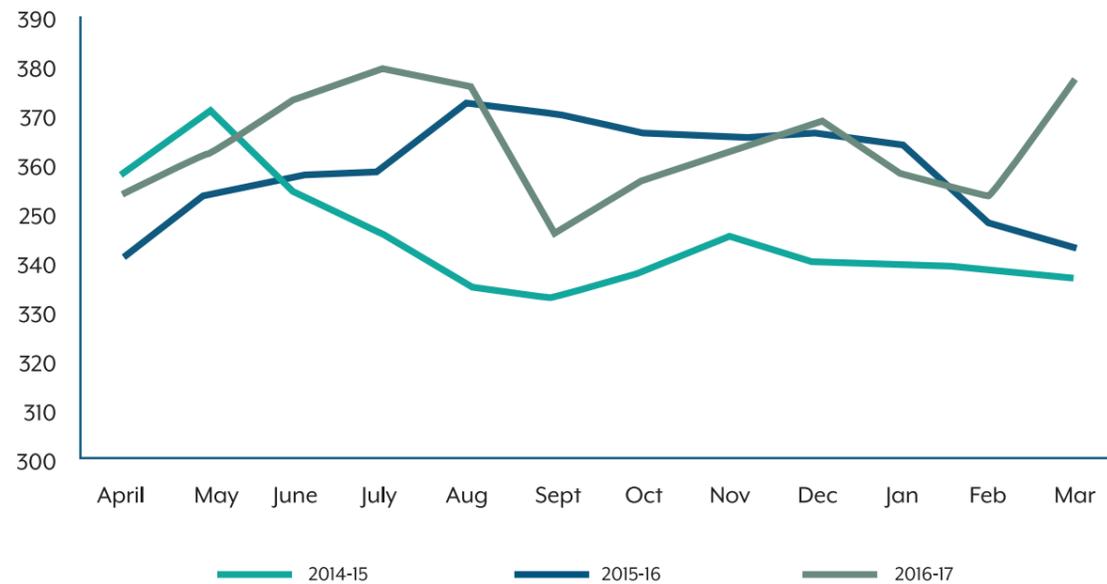
Whilst a "surplus" of adopters might look like sufficiency, consideration also needs to be given to the fact that collectively the families waiting may not be able to meet the needs of many of the children waiting, and this in turn represents a further challenge in relation to future adopter recruitment.

Average figures from the last 4 quarters suggest that a net 840 children are entering the system requiring adoption each quarter against a net 460 adopters. Assuming that placement order numbers remain stable, and these trends continue, far more adopters will need to be recruited and approved in the future than is presently the case, not just by our Service, but by all agencies nationally.

Over the last year the number of Looked After Children in Gateshead has ranged from 346 at its lowest to 380 at its highest. Since the peak of 380, the Looked After figure has fluctuated throughout the year. The Gateshead Looked After rate per 10,000 children still remains high, higher than the regional rate of 82 and significantly higher than the national rate of 60 per 10,000.

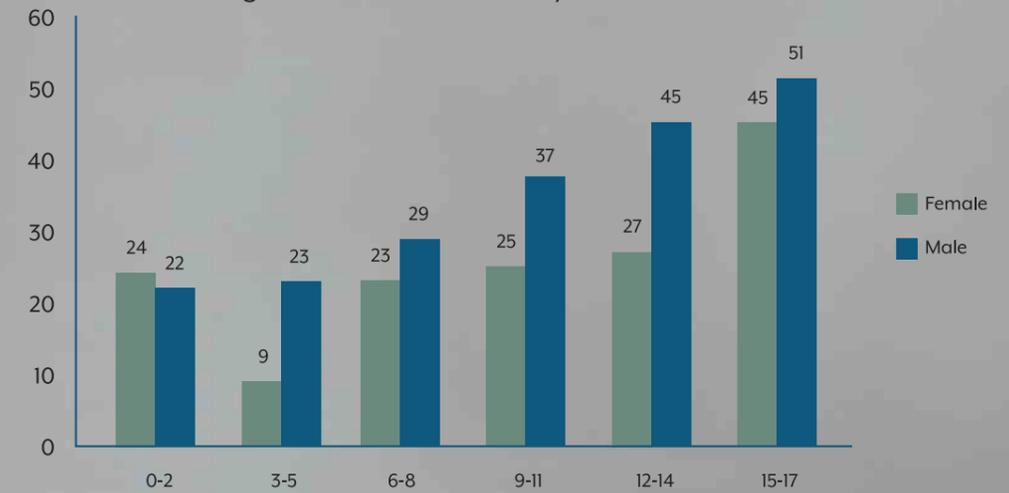
More recently the numbers of Looked After children have increased quite sharply to 377 which will be our 2017 year end figure.

Number of looked after children - April 14 - March 17



From September 2016 to February 2017 the number of Looked After children under the age of 2 has decreased and those aged 3-5 have increased quite significantly

Age of LAC as at 13 February 2017



The number of Placement Orders granted has remained constant during the latter part of the year. At 31 March 2017 there were 377 Looked After Children of whom 31 had a Placement order granted (8.2%). This represents a slight change in trend as previously the declining number of Placement Orders had a significant impact on the number of adoptions achieved and adopter recruitment generally.

Continuation of this new trend together with increasing numbers of Looked After Children will undoubtedly have implications for effective adopter recruitment in the year ahead, coupled with the ongoing need for the Service to broaden the pool of available families by attracting more prospective adopters able and willing to consider older children, sibling groups, and children with more complex needs.



Our performance April 2016 - March 2017

Children adopted

At the year end March 2017, **23** children placed for adoption by Gateshead Council had been successfully adopted, and a further **18** children were also in placement with their adoptive families, awaiting hearings for adoption orders. In addition, members of the team were also actively family finding for a further **11** children.

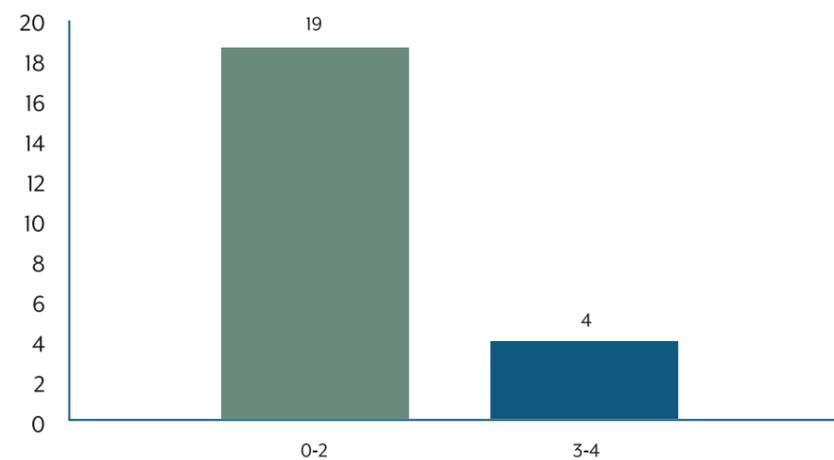
For some of this latter group the Service had already predicted that it would need to look outside of its own internal resources, given the children's' specific needs or a requirement to place geographically outside the north-east.

Of the **23** children adopted during the year 2016/17

- **5** were boys and **18** were girls.
- **14** children were placed individually and **9** children were part of a sibling group.

The average age at adoption in England for the year ending 31st March 2016 was 3 years 5 months, two months older than in 2015. The ages of the children placed for adoption by Gateshead Council and adopted during the same period corresponds well with the national picture.

Age band of children when adopted

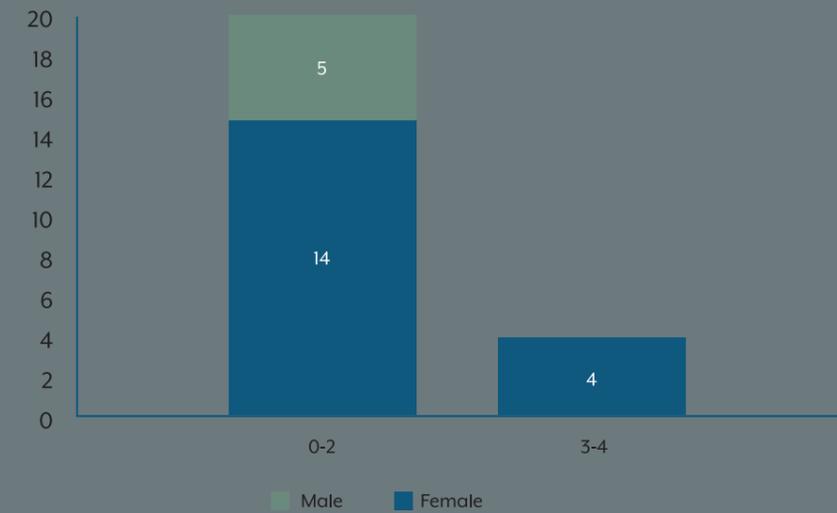


Whilst there has always been a high number of younger children adopted, in 2016/17 all our children were aged 4 or under when they were adopted.

This is a change from the previous year when 28% of our adoptions were for children over 4, including some slightly older children for whom the Service was successful in finding families and a foster carer who successfully adopted an older child with complex needs who had been in their care from a very young age.

Figures for England reveal that 53% (2,490) of children adopted during the year ending 31st March 2016 were boys and 47% (2,200) were girls. The figures for Gateshead for the same period show the opposite, with more girls than boys being adopted.

Number of children adopted by age and gender



For the year April 2016 to March 2017 23 adoptions took place of which 19 (82.6%) were within the best interest timescale of taking no more than four months between obtaining the legal authority to place a child for adoption and the agency making its decision on a match.

This is a considerable improvement in performance from the previous year end at which there were 26 adoptions of which (69.2%) 18 were in timescale.



Where cases were out of timescale during the year April 16/March 17 the Service was able to identify the reasons, which included:

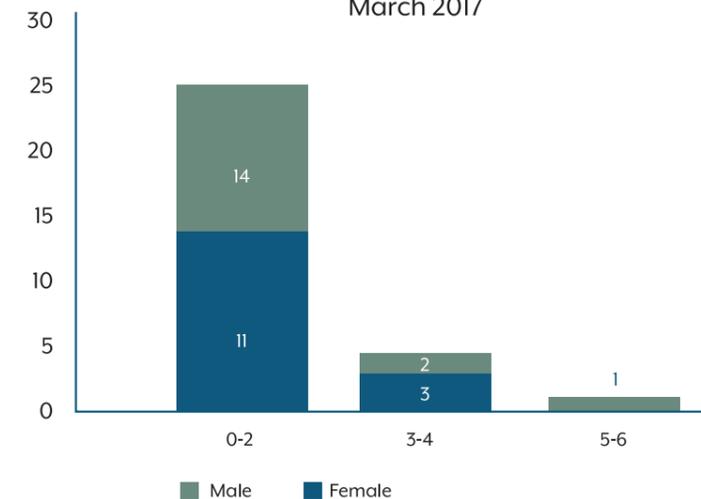
- Children having very complex backgrounds.
- Complex needs which impacted significantly on family finding, e.g. one child with considerable developmental delay.
- Issues of uncertainty, such as potential of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
- Issues in relation to achieving suitable placements of siblings together in a way that most effectively met the children's needs, e.g. where an older sibling was already in foster care and the plan for their unborn sibling also became adoption. Initially it was not possible to place the younger sibling in the same foster placement as their older sibling. Following the identification of a suitable foster placement together where both children's needs could be met a period of time was required for them both to settle and establish their sibling relationship before their subsequent move together to an adoptive placement

Gateshead Key Indicators	Average time between entering care and moving in with adoptive family (days)		Average time between court authority and deciding on a match (days)		Number and percentage of children adopted from care	
	2015/16	2016/17	2015/16	2016/17	2015/16	2016/17
	633	409	172	108	26 (12.5%)	23 (14.2%)

In relation to timescales for entering care and moving in with the adoptive family (14 months) there has been an improvement in these figures from the previous year.

For **13** of the **23** adopted children this timescale was achieved and for those outside of timescale the reasons are similar to those outlined above. In addition, in some cases the court process took much longer than anticipated to conclude and necessitated adjournments and/or additional requests for further assessments and reports.

Number of children with placement orders as at 31st March 2017



Of the **23** children adopted from care in 2016/17 91% (**21**) were matched with adopters assessed and approved by Gateshead and **2** were placed with adopters assessed by external agencies.

At the time of writing this report we currently have two families whose details are on the Register for whom there are no suitable in-house links but who are still awaiting a suitable link from the Register.

For several years the Service has been able to provide at least two-thirds of the families for Gateshead children requiring adoption from within its own internal resources. However, the figure for 2016/17 represents a very substantial increase on this.

Where we are unable to meet needs from within our own resources we will continue to proactively make use of external resources such as the Adoption Register to locate families for children. At the time of writing this report there are currently 708 active children on the Register, of whom 26 are from the North-East region, including 7 children from Gateshead.

Whilst this proportion of "in-house" placements is much higher than previous years this could be more reflective of the earlier down turn in the number of adoptive placements required and the agency having a larger than usual pool of available adopters waiting, and should not be taken as indicative of any need to reduce our efforts in any way with regard to the future recruitment of prospective adopters.

The level of family finding being undertaken within the Service has increased since year end March 2016 and the Service is currently in the process of attempting to identify prospective adoptive families for 12 children and also has advance notice in respect of a further 22 children whose cases are currently in court proceedings, or due to enter proceedings, and depending on the final outcome may potentially require adoptive placements.

Adopters for whom no suitable matches can be identified with Gateshead children within 3 months of their approval will continue to be encouraged and supported in their consideration of appropriate and suitable links with children from other agencies, and to submit their details to the Adoption Register, which is not only of benefit to children elsewhere in the country waiting for adoption but also assists the Service to offset some of its costs in purchasing external placements for children when needs cannot be met via our own resources.



Adopters approved

Within the year April 2016 to March 2017 Gateshead Council Adoption Panel recommended approval for 24 prospective adoptive families recruited and assessed by the Adoption Team. This is a 100% increase on the previous year's figure, which was lower as a consequence of the earlier reduction in the number of Looked After Children being granted Placement Orders and a reduced need for adoptive placements.

Quarter	Apr/June	Jul/Sept	Oct/Dec	Jan/March
Number of families approved	11	3	7	3

During the year ending 31 March 2016 in England 89% of children were adopted by couples and 11% by single adopters, 9.6% of children were adopted by same sex couples. Gateshead figures for the same period evidence that 96% of our children were adopted by couples and 4% by single adopters. During the year 2016/17 the majority of adopters approved by the agency (74%) were couples but this cohort also included 3 same sex couple (13%) and 2 single adopters (9%).

“We really appreciate all the amazing support you have given us over the adoption journey. You have been so professional and honest whilst also being caring and we have felt prepared for all stages of the process. We have felt you have been so easy to talk to and we always felt we could open up to you and obtain support. We will miss you and can't thank you enough. You really are a special person”.

Adopters June 2016

It is also pleasing to see that two sets of adopters approved during the year were “second time adopters” i.e. adopters who had previously adopted a child via Gateshead Council and had subsequently applied to us to adopt again.

The current assessment process is a two stage process with the expectation that the first stage is completed within two months and the second part within four months. Just over half the assessments presented to Panel within the past year have been completed within the 6 month timescale. Where the Service has been unable to meet this deadline we have been able to identify the reason. In the main this has generally been due to our awaiting the return of essential information from other agencies, such as police and health checks, without which it is not possible to proceed.

	Apr/Jun	Jul/Sept	Oct/Dec	Jan/Mar
Assessments completed	10	3	7	3
Within timescale	7	2	3	Nil
Outside timescale	3	1	4	3
Reasons	1 delayed by staff/adopter holidays 1 delayed as awaiting return of checks and references 1 delayed due to staff leaving the service and change of social worker	Awaiting return of references and checks/ annual holidays	1-Adopter requested break in process 2-Awaiting checks and references 1-Impact of Adopter and staff holidays	1-Awaiting return of checks and references 1-Report deferred by panel

At the date of writing this report the Service currently has 7 prospective adoptive families under assessment, with a further 13 adoptive families already approved and awaiting placements. There are links already in progress for a number of these families so it is anticipated that several Gateshead children currently requiring adoptive placements should be matched and placed with some of these families in the next few months.

‘Thank you for all the months of advice, support and help. Our family is now complete and without you this would not have been possible.’ Adopter November 2016

Matches

During April 2016 to March 2017 Gateshead Adoption Panel considered matches for **26** children with their prospective adoptive families, one less than the previous year. This figure includes **20** children placed individually and three sets of sibling groups of two. Eight of the **26** children were adopted during the year April 2016 to March 2017 and a further **17** of these children are currently placed with their adoptive families, awaiting their adoption.

Matches per Quarter	Apr/June	Jul/Sept	Oct/Dec	Jan/March	TOTAL
Total	14 children	2 children	4 children	6 children	26
Individual children	8	2	4	6	20
Sibling groups	3 groups of 2 siblings	nil	nil	nil	6
Matched In-house	8 children in total 1 sibling group x 2 6 individual children	2	1	5	16
Matched with External adopters	6 children in total 2 x 2 siblings 2 single children	nil	3	1	10



The overwhelming majority of the matches, 62%, were made with adopters recruited and assessed by Gateshead Adoption Service. This performance is in line with, and similar to, our performance over a number of years.

'For all your time and support through matching panel and the introduction week, we cannot thank you enough. Knowing you were always at the end of the phone or email and then talking to you about our little joy - we couldn't have wished for a better support worker! And we are over the moon with our child - they are ACE!' Adopters June 2016

Life Appreciation Days have been held for children over the age of 3 and a complex sibling group in order to help inform the prospective adopters of the childrens' background and history and likely needs following placement.

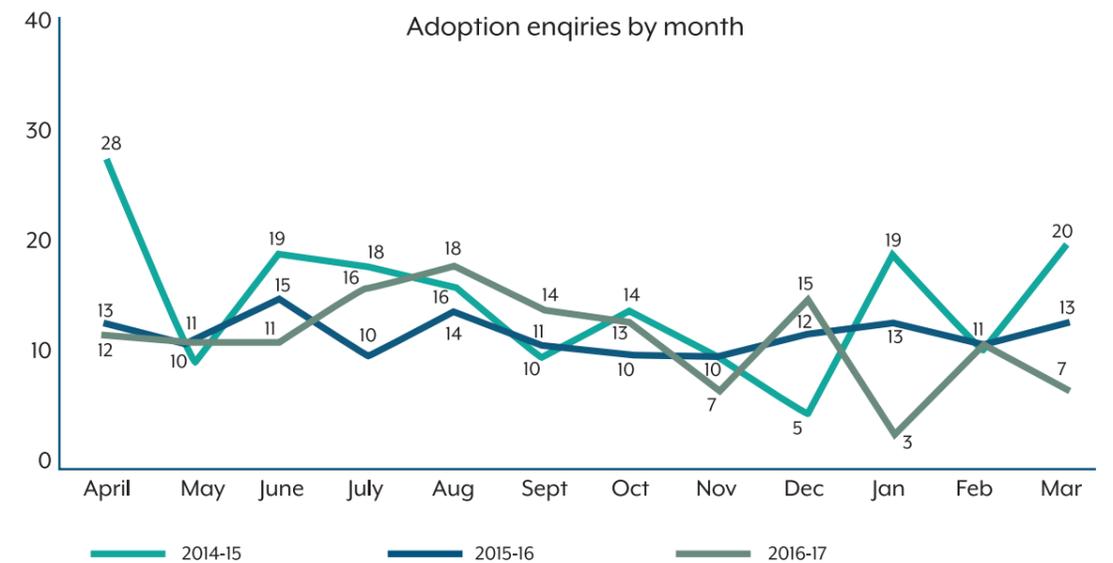
Adopter Recruitment

The Service has utilised various methods to recruit adopters during the past year including:

- Radio campaigns
- Regional outdoor (billboard) advertising
- Public Transport advertising

The graph below provides information of the trends in enquiries for the past three years, and although at a higher level than previous years 2012-2014, the numbers of enquiries received by the Service do appear to have fallen more recently, perhaps in line with national trends previously referred to in this report.

"When I contacted Gateshead the lady I spoke to was lovely." Prospective adopter - February 2017



During the early part of 2016 the service did experience some increase in referrals from neighbouring local authorities, mainly from adopters interested in adopting very young children and where their own local authority was not prioritising this type of recruitment.

"We researched different ways in which to adopt and spoke to voluntary agencies as well as local authorities. We felt that Gateshead stood out from other agencies in terms of their initial response and the information pack."

Prospective adopter - February 2017

Enquiries by Month	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	Total
April	13	3	28	12	13	69
May	5	6	10	11	11	43
June	5	7	19	11	15	57
July	6	4	18	16	10	54
August	8	4	16	18	14	60
September	9	3	10	14	11	47
October	8	6	14	13	10	51
November	6	10	10	7	10	43
December	8	2	5	15	12	42
January	10	26	19	3	13	71
February	13	26	11	11	11	72
March	7	11	20	13	7	58
Total	98	108	180	144	137	667

Out of 137 enquiries received in 2016/17 we issued 19 registrations of interest forms. This represents a conversion rate of 13.8%; which equates to nearly 1 in every 8 enquiries progressing to the stage of being invited to register an application. This is a reasonable outcome given we know that a high proportion of enquirers will approach a number of agencies before finally deciding on which agency to register their interest with.

The table below evidences the origin of the enquiries received by the Service. Given that one of the service aims is to offer an assessment to potential adopters within a fifty mile radius we will continue to promote Gateshead Council across a broad geographical area in order to attract prospective adopters from outside the Council boundaries.

This is particularly pertinent as there are occasions when the Service needs to identify options for children requiring placements outside the immediate vicinity.

Enquiries by Area	2012/2013	%	2013/2014	%	2014/2015	%	2015/2016	%	2016/2017	%	Total
County Durham	2	2.04%	5	4.63%	15	8.57%	7	4.86%	9	6.87%	38
Cumbria					1	0.57%	1	0.69%			2
Gateshead	49	50.00%	53	49.07%	98	56.00%	54	37.50%	59	45.04%	313
Glasgow City									1	0.76%	1
Hartlepool					1	0.57%			1	0.76%	2
Newcastle Upon Tyne	4	4.08%	4	3.70%	9	5.14%	13	9.03%	16	12.21%	46
North Tyneside	3	3.06%	3	2.78%	12	6.86%	9	6.25%	8	6.11%	35
Northumberland	3	3.06%	6	5.56%	1	0.57%	12	8.33%	7	5.34%	29
Redcar and Cleveland					1	0.57%	1	0.69%			2
Slough					1	0.57%					1
South Gloucestershire			1	0.93%							1
South Tyneside	10	10.20%	9	8.33%	7	4.00%	10	6.94%	10	7.63%	46
Stockton-on-Tees									1	0.76%	1
Sunderland	3	3.06%	6	5.56%	13	7.43%	15	10.42%	3	2.29%	40
Not Recorded	24	24.49%	21	19.44%	16	9.14%	22	15.28%	16	12.21%	99
Total	98	100%	108	100%	175	100%	144	100%	131	100%	656

The majority of enquiries continue to come from within the Gateshead area but more input into recruitment from outside the area will need to be put into place for the year ahead in order to offer a wider number of placement options for children.

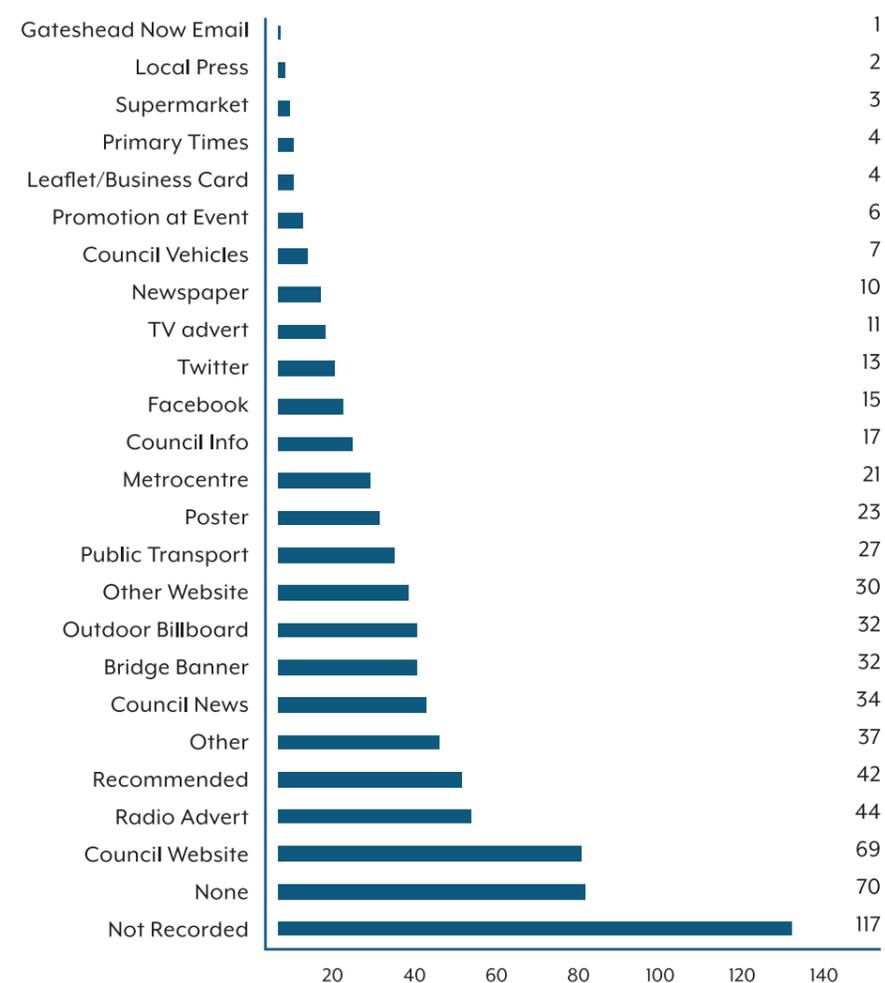
To ensure that the high level of adopter recruitment from within the immediate locality is also maintained we will continue to make full and effective use of "Free of charge" tools such as Council News, Council Website, Council Info and Gateshead Now.

In order to monitor the effectiveness of our recruitment activity we routinely ask all our enquirers which of our promotional materials they have seen. The table on the following page shows all of the promotional materials which have been seen and used by enquirers since 2014.

The top eight channels cited are:

- Council Website
- Radio Adverts
- Recommended
- Council News
- Bridge Banners/Billboards
- Other website
- Public transport

Promotional Material Seen



31 individuals commented that they came to us “by word of mouth” and indicated that Gateshead Council had been recommended to them by friends, colleagues or professionals. As a result we have seen an increase in recommendations in 2016/17. Further feedback also indicates that a large proportion of enquirers have found the sections on adoption on the Council website very informative and helpful. This feedback will also be utilised to help inform and improve our communication and recruitment plans for the year ahead.

“Recommended by a friend of friends. Impressed at the information evening and also by the Ofsted rating.” Adopter - June 16

The Service has held six information evenings and quarterly training sessions for prospective adopters in the past year and it would be our intention to maintain this level in the year ahead.

**“Fantastic course leaders, friendly and understanding - great team, thank you”
July 2016 Training Participant & Prospective Adopter**

Family finding for children

The service will continue to utilise a wide range of family finding methods for children such as the Adoption Register, Adoption Link, Parents for children and access national and voluntary sector resources as required. Members of the team will also continue to be involved in regional family finding events and meetings such as Activity days and, as and when required, the Service will host its own “You, Me, Us” profiling events.

Future family finding

If we take an average of the last two years as a benchmark for the number of Looked After Children who might require adoption then one could estimate that at the very most 10% of our Looked After Children may need adoptive placements.

However, one would also need to continue to monitor these figures on a regular basis to see if trends change.

For comparison,

- If we predict that 10% of our Looked After Children will need adopting then we would need to recruit adopters for at least 36 children.
- If we predict that the figure is nearer to 7 or 8 % then we would need to recruit adopters for between 25 to 29 children respectively.

It would therefore seem sensible to plan our recruitment strategy for the year ahead to meet a minimum need for **29** placements, similar in number to the number of children currently with a placement order in place as of 31st March 2017.

There will always be identified placement needs which simply could not be met from within our own resources and for which the agency will need to seek external placements from either regional or national partners.

Similarly, there will be the continuing need to monitor the level of recruitment of in-house adopters on a regular, ongoing basis and have suitable contingency plans in place to broaden the choice of suitable placements in the event that the agency experiences further rises in the number of placement orders and/or Looked After children for whom the plan may become adoption.

Recruitment of adopters in the year ahead will need to focus on prospective adopters able to consider young children and young sibling groups, but given the trends suggested by the work of the ALB and the increasingly complex background of children being placed for adoption, the Service will need to re-evaluate its earlier recruitment activity with a view to identifying new ways and methods to better attract additional applicants able to consider placements of older children and sibling groups, as well as very young children with complex developmental and health issues.

Foster for Adoption

We have incorporated information about Fostering for Adoption into all our information and publicity for prospective adopters and into the preparation training. Fostering for Adoption will not be suitable for all adopters so this is an aspect that would be robustly explored with prospective adopters both during the assessment process and following approval. Effective links are also in place with the Fostering Service to provide additional input and training with regard to the fostering requirements for prospective adopters who might be interested in offering such placements.

Since the implementation of Fostering for Adoption the Service has been able to offer a small number of Foster for Adoption placements.

The background circumstances of each placement have been very different and the experience of the adopters involved to date has been varied, partly as a result of requirements of the courts

“Fostering to adopt is a relatively new initiative that is successfully achieving permanence through adoption for children. One fostering-to-adopt couple spoke positively of how they were able to care for a new-born baby through early medical treatments in hospital. The baby had the opportunity to form early attachments from birth... This is a very positive start and the Service is actively promoting this initiative as part of the options for adoption in all recruitment activity.”

Ofsted inspection report - March 2016.

Adoption Support

In 2015-16 the government invested £19.3 million towards the creation of the National Adoption Support Fund (ASF). The fund came into operation on 1st May 2015 and is intended to be used for payments for therapeutic interventions to help support adoptive families. Recent announcements have confirmed that the ASF will continue to operate with increased funding every year until 2020, following which it is hoped plans will be in place to ensure its future sustainability. Since the inception of the Adoption Support Fund the Adoption Service has made several applications to the Fund and has been successful in obtaining funding for all but one of the applications, which was deemed not to meet the necessary criteria.

The average amount received per application has been in the region of £1,700 and has been used to commission services such as therapeutic life story work and counselling for adoptees, therapeutic parenting sessions for adoptive parents, and therapeutic respite and short-breaks for children in adoptive families. Since implementation the remit of the fund has been further expanded and access to funding for therapy is now available to Special Guardians of children who were previously Looked After. This will require the agency to review and update current application processes, and identify the capacity for dealing with a potential increase in the number of applications and requests for support, once details of increased access to the fund becomes known more widely and publicly.

The Service will continue to review and consider what changes can be made in terms of its existing service provision to help develop and enhance the current “Gateshead adoption support offer”.

We already have in place a well-established support group and the facility to offer a parenting skills group courses for adopters. We will also continue to run our annual "Summer Fun Day" for adopters in July each year. This day provides a great opportunity for adopted children and their parents to get together and enjoy activities and provides an excellent informal support opportunity as adoption social workers are also available on the day.

In addition to information sessions and training for prospective and approved adopters, new group sessions were introduced during the year 2016-17 specifically for extended family members of prospective adopters who were likely to provide support to placements. The aim of these sessions is to relay information about the nature of adoption, the likely background factors for children requiring adoption and offer advice as to how family members can best help support their adopters. Two sessions were run last year, both of which received positive feedback from participants, and further sessions will be offered in the year ahead.

'Thanks for letting me know and I'll look forward to hearing about other sessions. As I said on the phone, I found the session I attended really helpful and left me with plenty to think about. As I hope you are aware, we were both more than happy with the training and general 'adoption process' we went through. However, all the training in the world couldn't really prepare you for the realities especially as the youngsters get older'.

Adopters July 2016

The service has also maintained its involvement in local initiatives, such as the Sage Music Project, which not only provides support to adopters, but helps children's development and attachment through the use of music, and we will continue to be involved in any future discussions with the project in relation to further project development.

We also continue to work alongside other adoption agencies in the region to run a monthly "Waiting Adopters Group". This group provides support to approved adopters who are waiting to be matched with a child or children. These groups are generally well attended by Gateshead adopters alongside staff from the Adoption Team.

Our post adoption contact post-box system currently manages 467 different contact agreements involving both adopters and birth families. Each separate contact agreement can include several individuals in addition to birth parents and adopters, e.g. siblings, grand-parents etc. Consequently the amount of information involved in such exchanges, and people affected by post adoption contact who may need support, will vastly exceed this figure. Capacity to manage this will become more pertinent given the number of arrangements continues to rise each year, and currently is up by a further 24 agreements on the previous year's figures.

As well as dealing with an increased number of contacts our input and support to birth family members affected by adoption and adopters requiring support post adoption also appears to be increasing. There has been a rise in the referrals from families who are resident in Gateshead but who adopted children via other adoption agencies. Once that agency's statutory responsibility for providing support has ceased it becomes the responsibility of the agency where they are residing.

"I want to thank you for all you've done - taking time to help, any information or place you thought would help you contacted on my behalf. Alas it did not reap any benefits but your effort and time and kindness was much appreciated".

Adoption support case - request for access to records, July 2016

Our existing Service Level agreement with After Adoption currently enables us to pass on a small number of adoption support and access to birth record cases and to offer families requiring a support service the option of input that is independent of the local authority, thus adding capacity and flexibility to our adoption support offer.

Disruptions, adopters withdrawing, changes of plan for children

At the latter part of the year end 2016/17 the Service was involved, along with other teams in the agency, in working with several adoptive families experiencing difficulties with children mainly in teenage years/early adolescence. These families included children who had been placed by other agencies with families living in Gateshead but also a couple of children who had been placed by Gateshead and had been living with their respective adoptive families for several years.

Many of the children in question had very complex needs, some of which became more apparent and intensified following their placement in their adoptive family. At an appropriate point in time in the year ahead it will be beneficial for the Service to undertake an intensive review of at least one of these cases in order to help identify any points of learning and areas for future service development.

"There are minimal disruptions, with one break down in 2014-15. This demonstrates the quality of matches for children and the post-adoption support available. The potential lessons from a review of the disrupted placement have been reflected on by the service and the Adoption panel"

Ofsted inspection report - March 2016.

Complaints and compliments

For the year 2016/17 the Council's Complaints section has no records of any formal complaints in relation to the Service which needed to be addressed. More positively, the Complaints Section has received 18 compliments from a variety of sources including social workers, applicants going through the process and those who have successfully adopted. A selection of some of these comments has been incorporated into various sections of this report.

"Thanks again for all your support. Gateshead has to rank at the top of Adoption support!"

Social Worker, CoramBAAF August 2016

For the year 2016/17 four potential adoptive families withdrew from the process. Three families withdrew prior to their assessment being completed. Registrations of Interest had been accepted but could not be progressed beyond Stage One. In all of the cases this was as a result of issues in relation to statutory checks and references. One set of approved adopters with a birth child who had been awaiting a placement for some time also decided to withdraw from the process, due to a significant change in life circumstances for their family.

During the year 2016-2017 the plan for adoption was subsequently changed in respect of seven children, where authority to place for adoption was not obtained or the plan became long-term fostering or placement with member of the extended birth family.

Central List membership for Adoption Panel - April 2016 to March 2017

The following members of the Central List have attended at least one meeting of the Panel this year:

Ian Gates, Independent Chair
 Paul Forbes, independent, (Vice Chair)
 Councillor Peter Mole
 Karen Wilson, Social Worker, Fostering Team
 Shauna Garrett, Assistant Team Manager, Fostering Team
 Debbie Wilkinson, Team Manager, Safeguarding and Care Planning Team
 Janet Dugdale, Team Manager, Safeguarding and Care Planning Team
 Jill Smith, Clinical Psychologist
 Ann Forster, Adopter
 Sharon Jones, Adopter
 Neil Carr, Foster Carer, left the Central List in May 2016.

Medical Adviser and Panel member: Dr Helen Palmer/
 Dr Carole Mason

Panel Advisers
 Janice Cook, Angela Simmons-Mather/Legal Services
 Anne Roberts, Adoption Team Manager

Panel Administrator Sonia Forster (Samantha Shannon for 1 panel)

“The adoption panel is suitably robust and carefully considers recommendations for approvals and the quality of matching children with adopters. The agency decision maker makes timely decisions and, where required, pursues additional information to inform well-considered decisions for children.”

Ofsted report - March 2016.



Adoption Service Quality Assurance Framework

The Adoption Service has a robust quality assurance system in place to ensure that feedback is received at various stages of the adoption process. All feedback is collated and used to inform service planning. The table below outlines each stage of the quality assurance process:

Adoption Service Quality Assurance Framework

Stage	Mechanism	Person completing assessment
1.	Training Evaluation Form	Completed by prospective adopter following attendance at training
2.	End of Stage 1 meeting with Team Manager	Discussion led by Team Manager and outcome agreed
3.	Quality Assurance Visit (Pre Adoption Panel)	Adoption Team Manager or Senior Practitioner
4.	Adoption Panel Attendance Feedback Form	Adopter and Child's Social Worker
5.	Satisfaction Survey completed following adoption order	Adopter and Child's Social Worker

During the past year the majority of the feedback received through these processes has been extremely positive. The comment below is reflective of the type of feedback received.

“We were kept up to date throughout the process. Our Social Worker was open and honest with us throughout the assessment. She spent time getting to know us which was invaluable during panels and the matching process. Both our social worker and the children's' social workers have been incredibly supportive and reassuring since placement. We would recommend Gateshead to anyone thinking of entering the process.”

Adopter - November 2016



Key Issues and aims for the year ahead

In 2016/17 the key issues for the Adoption Service will be to:

- To build on our recruitment approach to attract potential adopters from within a 50 mile radius of Gateshead, and to increase the numbers of enquiries from potential adopters, particularly those who might wish to consider older or more complex children or sibling groups.
- To explore opportunities for continued collaborative working with other Local Authorities and voluntary adoption agencies in order to maximise placement choices for children.
- Meet the increasing demand for post adoption support as children with more complex needs continue to be placed for adoption. Evaluate and develop the existing post adoption support that is on offer and make effective use of the Adoption Support Fund. Ensure the provision of access to the fund as appropriate for Special Guardians of previously Looked After Children.
- Continued exploration and development of "fostering to adopt" opportunities in order to reduce delay for children.
- To continue to managing the changes and the requirements of the Adoption Reform agenda, and the implications of the "regionalization of adoption" which will require all local authorities in England to move to a system by 2020 whereby adopter recruitment, family finding for children and adoption support will all be delivered on a regional basis.
- Continued monitoring of our performance and systems to effectively analyse outcomes and identify potential areas for future service development

Conclusion

The Service has achieved several positive outcomes during the past year. Twenty-three children have been successfully adopted and a number of children are currently placed with their adoptive families awaiting adoption. We managed to recruit a sufficient number of adopters to meet our needs during the year and placed several children for adoption with a low level of placement breakdown. We continued to promote initiatives such as fostering to adopt when appropriate. The Service has also continued to develop its adoption support offer, making sensible use of the adoption support fund. Furthermore members of the Service have played a full and constructive part in much of the regional work that has been undertaken by local authority and voluntary sector partners in respect of the development of a Regional Adoption Agency, (Adopt NE).

