

Manual:	Adoption Service Procedures
Title:	Policies of the Adoption Service (AD/002)
Last Reviewed:	25/03/2015
Next Review Due:	25/03/2018

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GENERAL

The Durham County Council Adoption Agency will:

- Place the child/young person and her/his needs at the centre of the adoption process. In making decisions, children and young people's welfare and safety shall be paramount;
- Provide a comprehensive range of adoption services to meet the needs of children, young people, birth families, adopters, adopted adults and the courts. The service will include agency, inter-country and relative (including step-parent) adoption;
- Ensure that all decisions on adoption matters are based upon accurate and objective information that is sensitively written, accurate, complete and kept safely;
- Maintain an Adoption Panel or Panels sufficient to meet its obligations to children and young people and adopters and will ensure that these panels operate within the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005;
- Apply similar values and quality standards across all types of adoption: domestic, inter-country, and step-parent;
- In the planning and delivery of adoption services, actively seek to work in collaboration with other relevant agencies including Health and Education, other adoption agencies and voluntary agencies, especially those within the region, and with national agencies and central government;
- Provide services that conform to the National Adoption Standards, the DfES Adoption Guidance and other statutory requirements and meet the required timescales laid down for children and young people who are looked after;
- Track the progress of each individual child/young person looked after for whom a plan for permanence away from their birth family is necessary from the four month statutory review until the child/young person is adopted or secured in some other form of permanent care;
- Maintain management information systems to allow its permanency planning processes and performance at all stages to be monitored and compared with the requirements of the DfES Adoption Guidance and the National Standards;
- Inform the Council's councillors as corporate parents, of the management and outcomes of the service;
- Children, young people, birth parents, adopters and adopted adult will be informed of their right to make complaints or representations if they feel that the service they receive has not conformed to National Standards, Adoption Guidance or those laid out in this policy and associated procedures. Those wishing to complain will be informed about the complaints procedure and given the opportunity to make their complaints to the complaints officer;

And the Durham County Council Adoption Agency is:

- Committed to equipping and supporting its staff to develop the skills, experience and knowledge to work with children, young people, birth parents and adopters to produce good placement outcomes for children and young people. Similarly, the Agency will arrange training in adoption and permanence matters for councillors, panel members and managers that is related to their roles and responsibilities.

TIMESCALES

- In line with the National Adoption Standards and the DfES Adoption Guidance, the following timescales will be adhered to:
 - A plan for permanence will be in place and endorsed for all children and young people who are looked after at the four month statutory review;
 - Where adoption has been identified as the plan for a child/young person at a review, the Adoption Panel will make its recommendation within two months;
 - A proposed placement with suitable adoptive parents will be identified and approved by Panel within six months of the Agency agreeing that the child/young person should be placed for adoption;
 - In care proceedings, where the plan is adoption, a proposed placement with suitable adoptive parents will be identified and approved by Panel within six months of the placement order being granted;
 - Where a parent has requested that a child aged under 6 months be placed for adoption, a proposed placement with suitable adoptive parents will be identified and approved within three months of the Agency agreeing that the child should be placed for adoption;
 - Initial enquiries from prospective applicants will receive a written response within five working days;
 - Prospective applicants will have an initial interview with an adoption SW within two months;
 - In the case of applicants whom the Agency accepts for assessment, a decision on the outcome will be made by the Agency within six months of the acceptance of the formal application;
 - If the two preceding processes follow each other without a gap, it will be the intention to complete the whole process from enquiry to decision regarding suitability in no more than eight months;
 - Foster carers applying to adopt children and young people who are placed with them will be assessed within four months of their application;
 - Applicants will receive a copy of their assessment report at least 10 days before the Adoption Panel and be given the opportunity to comment on the report. Their comments will be made known to the Panel;
 - The Panel will receive all necessary information regarding an application to adopt within four weeks of the completion of the assessment report;
 - Panel recommendations will be conveyed orally to applicants, children, young people and birth parents within 24 hours of the Panel;
 - Decisions will be made by the Agency Decision Maker within seven days of the Panel recommendation;
 - Decisions will be conveyed orally to the applicants, the child/young person and the birth parents within 24 hours;
 - Decisions will be confirmed in writing by the Agency decision maker within seven working days;

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The welfare of the child/young person is the paramount consideration in all adoption matters.

The Agency will ensure that:

- Children and young people are carefully listened to;
 - Children and young people's views about their situation, in particular, who they live with in future and who they continue to have contact with are recorded and actively taken into account at each stage;
 - Reasons are given when children and young people's views are not acted upon;
 - Children and young people receive continuing high quality social work support during the whole placement process; that children and young people have a clear understanding as to who is responsible for supporting them, and what they can do if they are unhappy with the support or services they are receiving at any time;
 - Children and young people receive services that meet their assessed needs. These include advice and counselling, health, education, leisure and cultural services and practical and financial help when needed;
 - Children and young people receive proper preparation for placement and support after placement. This will include clear appropriate information on their birth family and life before adoption and information about the adopters and their family;
 - Children and young people of sufficient age and understanding who wish to present their own views in person may be invited to attend panel meetings considering a proposal that the child/young person be placed for adoption;
 - Reasons for actions are carefully recorded in children and young people's case records for their benefit in later life;
 - Strenuous efforts are made to gather and preserve material and information provided by members of their birth family and others to contribute to the child/young person's sense of heritage and identity in their future lives. The Agency and adopters will strive to ensure that this information will be provided to adopted children and young people at a time and in a manner that reflects their age and understanding, as well as the nature of the information concerned;
 - Information from agency records will be made available for the child/young person when they are of an age and level of understanding to comprehend it.
- The Agency recognises that delay is generally damaging to children and young people, especially babies and young children who need to develop secure attachments from their earliest months. From the moment the child/young person becomes looked after, the Agency's policy will pursue a positive permanent outcome for the child/young person without delay. The Agency is therefore committed to developing monitoring systems, practice and procedures to combat delay and drift at every stage of the child/young person's period of being looked after.
 - When a child/young person cannot be cared for by their birth family and the permanency of adoption represents the best option, an appropriate care plan will be formulated and at the earliest opportunity presented in a full report on her/his circumstances, the child/young person's permanence report, to the Adoption Panel.

- Where because of the child/young person's identified needs (for example, requiring more individual work before being ready to be placed for adoption) it is not appropriate to meet any one of the timescales laid down in the National Adoption Standards and/or Adoption Guidance the reasons for this decision will be recorded at the child/young person's statutory review and made known to the Adoption Panel.
- If the Agency decides that adoption is in the best interests of the child/young person every effort will be made to link that child/young person to suitable prospective adopters as soon as possible in accordance with the needs of the child/young person.
- The Agency will aim to meet children and young people's needs in placement by careful attention to understanding the needs of the child/young person and identifying the key matching issues. However, this principle will not override the needs for achieving permanency within a reasonable period of time.
- The Agency will seek to place children and young people within County Durham whenever possible to safeguard the child/young person's sense of identity, maximise post placement support and facilitate ongoing contact. However, where there is little likelihood of recruiting suitable adopters in County Durham or the child/young person's needs so indicate, the Agency will actively seek placement possibilities initially within neighbouring counties and subsequently nationwide. In doing so, the Agency will co-operate fully with the National Adoption Register and refer children and young people awaiting placement to the Register as required in the relevant Government circulars and guidance.
- In the case of a looked after child/young person requiring adoption and born to foreign nationals the Agency will consider with the child's parents if it is in the child's interests to explore the possibility of the child/young person being placed within the parents' home country.
- Where this is not possible, or where inter-country adoption implying transracial or transcultural placement is the plan, the Agency will attempt by preparation and attention to matching considerations to do all possible to ensure that the child/young person, once placed, is enabled to affirm and value their own ethnicity and culture and is helped and equipped to deal with any racism or other forms of discrimination they may experience.
- The Agency will make strenuous attempts to place each child/young person with their sibling group unless this is clearly contraindicated by the needs of the child/young person. Where this is not possible, the child/young person will be given a clear explanation, which will be recorded. Where brothers and sisters are not living together, the Agency will seek to promote contact between them unless this is clearly inappropriate.
- The cost of any one placement will not be a factor in selecting an appropriate adoptive family for a child/young person.
- Where the permanency plan is for adoption, it will include details of the arrangements for maintaining links (including contact) with birth parents, wider birth family members and other people who are significant to the child/young person and how these arrangements will be managed. The child/young person's needs, wishes and feelings, and their welfare and safety will be the most important concerns when considering such links or contacts.
- The Agency will establish appropriate arrangements for the transfer of information between birth parents and adoptive parents where some form of continuing indirect contact is judged to be in the child/young person's best interests. The transfer of information between the respective parties will be the subject of a written agreement.

- Because placement disruptions can be such destructive experiences for children, young people and adopters, the Agency will strive to reduce the risk of disruption by careful assessment, matching and good post placement support. Where there is the potential for disruption or disruption occurs, the Agency will provide speedy and sensitive support to children and adopters.
- On all occasions that disruption occurs a disruption meeting will be arranged and the Adoption Panel will receive a report to consider the circumstances and note learning points for future placements. The main issues will be disseminated to all relevant practitioners and managers.
- Where there is concern about the care received by a child/young person placed for adoption or adopted, the Agency will follow the relevant child protection procedures of the Durham Local Safeguarding Board. In the case of children and young people placed for adoption (who remain looked after) the Agency will follow the notification requirements of Regulation 44(1) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

- The Agency recognises that it is sometimes more difficult to find permanent placements for children and young people with disabilities or medical conditions.
- As such the Agency will proactively search for prospective adopters and permanent foster carers willing and able to adopt children and young people with disabilities and to provide as much support, advice and practical assistance as possible.

RELINQUISHED BABIES

- The Agency recognises that adoption can be a positive choice for those parents faced with difficult decisions surrounding a pregnancy that may be unexpected, unwanted or impossible for the birth parents to cope with for a variety of reasons.
- The Agency undertakes to ensure that people facing this situation are provided with timely, accurate and positive information about both the adoption process and the other options available to them, including access to support services should they decide to keep the child. They will also be signposted to other organisations that can provide further information and therapeutic counselling.

BIRTH FAMILIES

- Birth parents will be informed and consulted at the earliest stage when the Agency has decided to pursue adoption as the plan for permanence.
- The Agency will consider the wishes and views of birth families and will explore all alternatives to adoption with them provided that this is consistent with the duty to safeguard and promote the child/young person's welfare.
- Birth parents will be provided with a counselling service the purpose of which is to ensure they are aware of their rights and responsibilities, that alternatives to adoption are explored and that the nature and implications of adoption are discussed fully.
- Arrangements will be put in place for birth parents to have access to a support worker independent of the child/young person's social worker from the time adoption is identified as the plan for the child/young person.
- Other than in exceptional circumstances, and having first taken legal advice, children and young people's social workers will make all reasonable attempts to identify and consult absent birth parents including those without parental responsibility.

- Birth parents will have the opportunity to give their account of events, comment on what is written about them in reports, make written representations to the Adoption Panel and comment on information passed to the adopters.
- Whenever consistent with the interests of the child/young person, the Agency will seek to maximise the involvement of birth parents and other family members in planning for adoption and to promote an inclusive approach to placement in which birth parents continue to be seen as a resource to their children.
- This will include:
 - Involving birth family members in the choice of or discussions about, the adoptive family placement;
 - Encouraging birth family members to provide information that the adopted child/young person will need. This will include information and material about the adopted child/young person's birth and early life, family history, the birth family's views about adoption and contact and up to date information about themselves and their situation;
 - Taking into account the parent's wishes with regard to placement with respect to the child/young person's religion, ethnicity, culture, education, interests, position in the family, placement with siblings, characteristics of adopters, etc;
 - Sharing non-identifying information about the adoptive family to allow the birth family members to develop a sense of the family's lifestyle and interests;
 - Encouraging an exchange of information between birth family members and prospective adopters prior to placement;
 - Encouraging adopters and birth parents and other relatives to meet on a "one off" basis, irrespective of whether there may be a plan for contact after the placement;
 - Keeping birth parents fully informed up to the point of adoption about significant developments affecting their children by providing non-identifying information unless they record their wish not to be or a clear Agency decision has been made that it would be unsafe to do so;
 - Recording a clear decision about how, following adoption, the birth parent should be kept informed if they wish and if agreed by the adopters and the adopted child;
 - Arranging the noting of updating information from one or more parties to an adoption placement on agency files. Considering brokering agreements prior to the adoption to pass on significant information (for example, relating to death or serious illness) when it is received or to be shared later if requested;
 - Parents will be given written details of available support services both from within the Service and external agencies once a plan for adoption is made.

ADOPTIVE APPLICANTS AND ADOPTERS

- People who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and given clear information about recruitment, priority needs, assessment and approval. They will be treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process;
- The Agency will actively seek to attract adoptive applicants from all sections of community: married people; couples living together; single people; same sex partnerships and members of diverse ethnic, cultural and religious groups in order to meet the diverse needs of County Durham's children and young people;
- No one will be excluded from applying to adopt on the grounds of age, health, disability or other factors and provided they satisfy the minimum age requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and have not been convicted or cautioned for offences that would prohibit them from becoming adopters. Each enquiry will be considered on its merits and in accordance with the Agency priorities for recruitment.;
- The Agency will be open with enquirers from the outset that applicants do not have the right to be assessed as adopters or to attend a preparation course. Any applicant who is not accepted for assessment will be given clear reasons, in writing, as to why not. They will be advised of the complaints procedure and where appropriate, invited to re-apply if their circumstances change;
- The Agency is committed to recruiting adopters who can meet the assessed needs of the children and young people awaiting adoption in County Durham. Priorities for pursuing applications will therefore vary with time, according to the particular needs of children and young people waiting for adoption. The Agency will be clear with enquirers as to how child/young person-led priorities relate to any decisions on progressing applications;
- The welfare of children and young people is of paramount importance, and thorough and rigorous checks and enquiries will be made of anyone seeking to adopt a child or young person;
- The Agency is committed to assessing prospective adopters in a fair, transparent and non-judgemental manner. Clear explanations and information will be given to prospective adopters at every stage of the process, including full information about assessment criteria. The assessment will involve the whole family and take into account factors relating to the family's heritage and culture;
- The Agency will seek to involve prospective adopters as much as possible in the assessment and approval process by:
 - Encouraging them to contribute written material about themselves to the assessment reports, which will go to the Adoption Panel;
 - Ensuring they have access to the reports the Agency writes about them and are encouraged to comment on their contents;
 - Encouraging and supporting their attendance at the Adoption Panel at which their application will be considered, giving them the opportunity to speak about their application and address any concerns of the assessing social worker or the Panel.
- If the Agency cannot, for any reason complete an adoption assessment within the timescales indicated in the Adoption National Standards and the DfES Adoption Guidance, the Agency will inform applicants of the reasons and be clear about when the assessment will be completed. The Agency will also inform the Panel of the reasons for the delay when the report is presented to it;

Second Time Adopters

- Adopters who are applying to adopt a second or subsequent child/young person will not normally be considered for additional placement(s) until at least 2 years after the original placement. The assessment will take account of how well the original child/young person is doing in the placement and consider the effects of a subsequent placement on that child/young person. Where the additional child/young person being considered is siblings of the first child/young person, these time constraints will not apply and each case will be dealt with individually.

Employees of Durham Children and Adults Service

- The Agency will ensure that when an employee of Durham Children and Adults Service or those closely associated with the Agency makes an enquiry about becoming a prospective adopter, that a conflict of interest assessment is completed at the outset. This is to ensure that any subsequent assessment of their suitability to be an adoptive parent is objective and that proper boundaries between an applicant's professional role and their personal life can be maintained. Where the conflict of interest assessment shows that it would be inappropriate for the Agency to proceed any further, the employee or person closely associated with the Agency will be assisted to apply to other neighbouring adoption agencies.

Post Approval

The Agency will:

- Continue to provide advice, support and counselling to the prospective adopters after they have been approved;
- Make every effort to match the prospective adopters with suitable children or young people and work with them to look at all ways of identifying those children and young people requiring adoptive placements that may be suitable;
- Ensure prospective adopters are reviewed on an annual basis;
- Inform prospective adopters at the outset of the National Adoption Register and with their agreement arrange for their names to be placed on the Register.

ADOPTION SUPPORT

- Durham Adoption Agency is committed to developing a comprehensive range of services aimed to support adoptees both as children and adults, birth families, prospective adopters and adopters in the periods before placement, after placement and post adoption;
- The Agency will seek to provide or facilitate from a single point of contact services that are both reactive and proactive, inclusive, accessible and age appropriate. The Agency will encourage all relevant statutory agencies (health services, education authorities, adult mental health services, housing services and Connexions) to include adoption support as part of their development plans;
- The need for adoption support will be assessed and a written plan provided:
 - For each child/young person and their birth relatives at the point a proposal is made that the child/young person should be placed for adoption;
 - For each prospective adopter at the approval stage;
 - And when a proposed placement is considered by the Adoption Panel.

- Adoption support plans will be discussed at each review before the child/young person is adopted and amended as necessary. Thereafter, the plan will be reviewed if requested by the child/young person or the adopters.
- Referrals for adoption support will be accepted from inter-country adopters, relative adopters (including step parent adopters) and for initial assessment from families with children placed within County Durham by other agencies. In these circumstances the Agency will seek to involve placing agencies in providing assistance to meet assessed needs.

THE ADOPTION PANEL

- The Durham Adoption Panel is established by the Durham County Council Adoption Agency to whom they are accountable. The Panel shall carry out its duties in accordance with the policies of the Durham Adoption Agency. No person will be appointed to serve as a member of the Adoption Panel who is not in agreement with these policies.
- The Adoption Panel of the Durham County Council Adoption Agency shall carry out the duties of adoption panels as set out in the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005.
- Where the Adoption Panel considers it has insufficient information, the making of a recommendation shall be deferred until that information can be presented to Panel.
- To ensure a level of independent scrutiny and in line with regulatory requirements, the Agency will appoint an independent person to be the chair of the Panel.
- Members will be appointed because of their particular expertise and life experience from which they can draw in their contribution to the Panel and its duties.
- The membership of the Panel will reflect the widest possible representation of County Durham's communities and of stakeholders in the adoption process as well as relevant professional expertise.
- The Agency will set out procedures for appropriate CRB checks and personal references to be taken up and for the appointment of new Panel members.
- The Agency will keep a confidential record of all such appointments, CRB checks and personal references.
- No person will be appointed to Panel membership unless they have satisfied the procedures for appointment, checks and reference as set out above.
- The Agency shall set out in procedures the roles of the chair, legal adviser, medical adviser and agency adviser
- Panel members are entitled to received induction and support as set out in the Agency's Protocol for Panel Members.
- Panel members will be reviewed annually against their agreed performance objectives. Any Panel member who does not meet the required standard will be offered appropriate advice and/or training to address performance issues. Where such advice/training is refused or does not result in the Panel member's performance reaching the required standard, the Agency will terminate that person's membership of the Adoption Panel.
- In considering its recommendations the Panel shall have regard to the duties of the Agency:
 - To safeguard and promote the welfare of the child/young person throughout her/his childhood;

- So far as its practicable, to ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child/young person and to give them due consideration, having regard to her/his age and understanding;
- In placing a child/young person to have regard, so far as it is practicable, to the wishes of her/his parents and guardians as to her/his religious upbringing.

ACCESS TO ADOPTION RECORDS

- The welfare, safety, needs, current circumstances and wishes of the adopted adult and others concerned with the adoption will inform any work undertaken.
- The Agency recognises its legal duty to provide counselling to adopted people aged 18 years and above who wish to have access to their birth records.
- The Agency will provide counselling to adopted adults whom it has placed and/or to adopted adults living within County Durham whose adoptions were arranged through other adoption agencies.
- Where adopted people over the age of 18 contact the Agency seeking further information and possible contact with their birth family, counselling and information on intermediary services will be made available. This includes those seeking access to their adoption records, referred to the Agency by the Registrar General.
- Where adopted people under the age of 18 contact the Agency seeking further information and possible contact with their birth family, the Agency will offer counselling and advice. Wherever possible this will be in conjunction with the adoptive family.
- Adopted people will not be able to read information from their adoption file from or about other people whose permission would be required before it can be shared. The Agency should be able to indicate to the adoptee the nature of this kind of withheld information. If the adoptee and the Agency agree that a particular piece of information is of great significance for the adoptee then the Agency will write to the person whose permission is required to ask their permission to share it.
- The Agency will advise adopted adults and their birth families of the Adoption Contact Register held by the Registrar General so that parties to an adoption can record their willingness to be approached.
- The Agency will provide information about support groups where advice and/or counselling can also be obtained such as the After Adoption, NORCAP, Adoption U.K. and Barnardos Post Adoption Link.
- The Agency acknowledges that the adopted person has the right to information held on the adoption case record about her/himself. Original documents may be taken by the adoptee and photocopies kept on file. In exceptional circumstances, discretion may be needed when it is considered that passing certain information might be harmful to the adoptee or the birth family. Any decisions to withhold information will be agreed by the Team Manager - Adoption and the details recorded on the adoption case record.

STEP PARENT ADOPTIONS

- The Agency will assist applicants to consider all alternatives to adoption.
- The Agency will arrange for a detailed report to be made to the court meeting legal requirements. Where the Agency is unable to meet these requirements within the court's or the applicants' required timescale the Agency will advise these parties in writing as to when this will be possible.

- The Agency will only recommend adoption where it is in the child/young person's best interest for such an order to be made.

APPLICATIONS FOR APPROVAL AS INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTERS

- Within current legal requirements, the Agency will apply the following general guidelines to individual cases.
 - Inter-country adoption may only be considered as a means of providing a family for a child/young person who cannot be cared for in a suitable manner in her or his own country. The Agency will seek advice, including that from the DfES as to whether this criterion is met at the time of an application;
 - Inter-country adoptions should take place in the best interests of the child/young person and with respect to her or his fundamental rights as recognised in international law;
 - Safeguards and standards equivalent to those that apply in domestic adoption will be applied in inter-country adoption to protect the welfare of the child/young person;
- The Agency will make no charge for the enquiry process. The Agency will charge those who make an application to be assessed as inter-country adopters for the administration of the application process. If accepted for assessment as adopters, the Agency shall make a further charge for the completion of the assessment process including a preparation course and for subsequent post placement support. The charges made will reflect the Agency's real costs and will not include any profit element.
- Although the Adoption National Standards timeframes do not specifically apply to inter-country adoption assessments, the Agency will make every effort to complete assessments in a timely manner. The Agency may need, however, to give priority to the completion and presentation to the Adoption Panel of the assessment of applicants who will be applying to adopt County Durham children and young people. Where there is delay, the reason for that delay will be explained to applicants.
- Given that in inter-country adoption, the responsibility to match approved adopters with children rests with the child/young person's country of origin, the Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker will give particular attention to recommending matching criteria for successful applicants.