

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL ADOPTION AGENCY

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE Dated: April 2011

URN: SC057941

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1. Aims and objectives of the local authority in respect of its Adoption Service

The authority aims to provide a service to all its customers that is welcoming, user friendly and non discriminatory.

The Adoption Service endorses the values underpinning the National Adoption Standards in setting service objectives and strives to promote the following principles within the timescales laid down by regulation:

- All children should be protected from emotional, physical and sexual harm and neglect
- All looked after and adopted children should be placed with carers who can provide safe and appropriate care.
- In preparing children for an adoptive family we will listen to their views and provide age appropriate information
- All service provision will be sensitive to the needs and diversity of the individual children, their birth parents and adoptive parents with particular regard to race, culture, religion, gender, disability and sexuality
- All service provision will be flexible, responsive and supportive of carers and children
- Adoptive parents require access to specialist preparation and ongoing support to carry out the additional adoptive parenting tasks.
- Adopted children and their parent/s require additional tools to process their unique histories and to understand their permanent separation from birth families
- The adoption service will act as a mediator and consultant with universal services to ensure sensitive inclusion.
- We acknowledge that adoption has lifelong implications for those adopted and their families.
- Partnership between all those involved in adoption is essential to deliver the best possible outcomes for children.

Based on these principles Herefordshire Children and Young People and Specialist Service aims to provide a comprehensive adoption service to all those who require it. The service is consistent with Adoption Regulations and National Minimum Standards which are reflected in comprehensive policies and procedures.

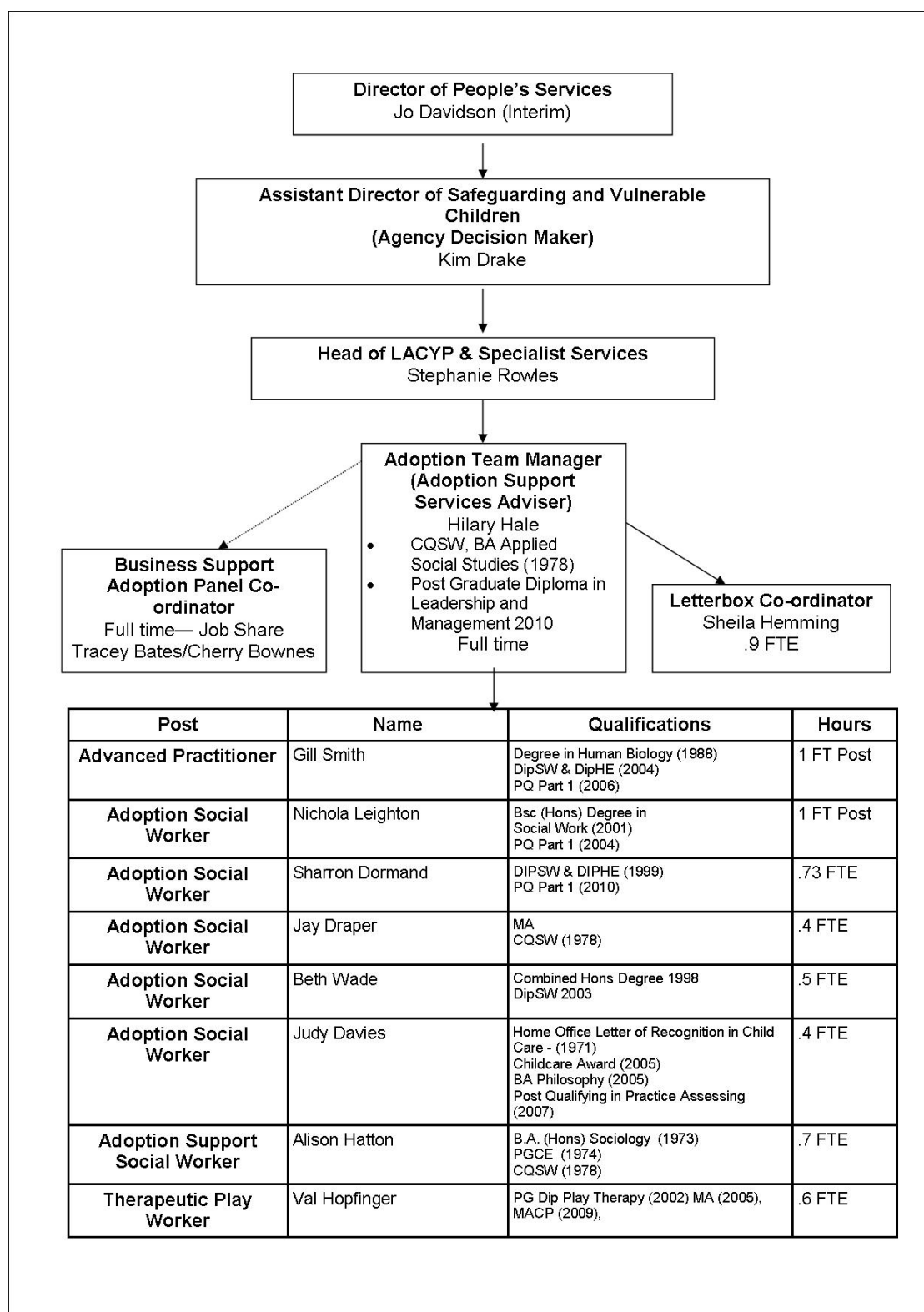
Services provided by Herefordshire Adoption Service:

- Recruitment, assessment, preparation and support of a wide range of prospective adoptive parents to meet the placement needs of children locally, nationally and overseas.
- Counselling, information and support for birth parents who lose or are at risk of losing their children to adoption.
- Counselling, information and support for pregnant women, their partners and extended families where they wish to place their baby for adoption.
- Counselling for adopted adults in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Adults requiring intermediary services are signposted

to 'Adoption Support', an independent Adoption Support Agency with whom we have a service level agreement.

- Advice and consultancy for social work practitioners and others who are working with children and families affected by adoption.
- Provision of counselling, assessment and court reports in step parent and other non agency adoption proceedings.
- Preparation of reports and attendance at other Local Authority panels when a match has been recommended for a Herefordshire approved family.
- Comprehensive adoption support for those affected by adoption in line with the Adoption Support Services Regulations, both prior to and after an adoption order has been made. This will include adoptive families unknown to the agency who reside in the county and request adoption support assessments 3 years post adoption order.
- Signposting, provision or commission of therapeutic services for children and their parents to ameliorate the impact of early trauma and abuse.
- Provision of adoptive families for children identified locally, through the West Midlands Family Placement Consortium and nationally through the Adoption Register.
- Adoption case records and all their contents are kept in secure conditions at all times and appropriate measures are taken to prevent theft, unauthorised disclosure, loss or destruction.

2. Organisational Chart.



Nominated Manager and Adoption Support Services Advisor.

- Hilary Hale was appointed to the post of Adoption Team Manager and Adoption Support Services Advisor in August 2006. She has extensive

experience as a local authority children and families social worker in Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, is an adoptive parent and was an adoption panel member for some years. Prior to this appointment she was a Team Manager in a children and families long term team.

- In the absence of the nominated manager responsibility for the service rests with the Head of Service for Looked After Young People and Specialist Services who may ask the advanced social work practitioner to deputise.
- Social workers preparing reports in relation to prospective adopter/s, adoption placements and other adoption specific reports are required to have three years post qualifying experience in child care social work (including direct experience of adoption work). All adoption social workers meet this requirement and are registered with the General Social Care Council.
- Herefordshire Children's Services strives to be a learning organisation; three social workers in the team are due to complete post qualifying awards in 2011.
- Through supervision, annual performance, appraisal and development interviews and specialist training Herefordshire Children's Services ensures that staff have the skills and knowledge to work effectively in the complex field of adoption practice whilst keeping up to date with safeguarding and legislative developments.
- The team have a stable staff group with a wide range of experience in the field of child care, disability and family placement, including a play therapist/child and adolescent psychotherapist who provides consultations to social workers, carers and parents and works directly with children, young people and adopters, and a recently appointed advanced social work practitioner.
- Written procedural and practice guidance, including safeguarding procedures are available via the Intranet to staff and this is updated regularly in light of practice and legislative changes.
- The clinical psychologist (joint funded post), Camhs LAC social worker and play therapist provide a consultative service to children's social workers, other professionals and carers, in addition to direct work with adopted children, young people and their parents.
- The adoption panel co-ordinator and letterbox co-ordinator are an integral part of the team, providing excellent support and a wide range of skills and experience to their roles.
- All members of the Adoption team including the support staff, have undertaken Safeguarding training.
- The Adoption Panel has a rolling programme of training with bi-annual half-day workshops in conjunction with the Adoption Service staff group.

3. The systems in place to monitor and evaluate the provision of services to ensure that services provided are effective and the quality of all aspects of service is of an appropriate standard.

Herefordshire Adoption Service will be inspected at a minimum every three years by OFSTED according to the Standards laid down in the Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2003

Service Planning Information.

- The nominated manager of the adoption service is a core member of the Legal Planning Panel which considers the cases of all children where legal proceedings may be indicated; this ensures early identification of children with a potential plan for adoption.
- The adoption manager attends a Looked After Children's Management meeting on a monthly basis. The meeting is underpinned by the ethos that seeking permanence for children looked after is a priority and the terms of reference and agenda reflect this.
- Monthly updates on the progress of cases considered by the Adoption Panel are given at each panel meeting.
- The Adoption Panel takes a proactive role in meeting its obligations to monitor the service's performance against National Minimum Standards.
- Bi-annual meetings of the Adoption Panel Monitoring Group allow the opportunity for the independent panel chair to bring to the attention of the Assistant Director issues of quality assurance in terms of delay and practice.
- An annual report of the adoption service's activities, management and performance is presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel with an interim report every six months. Members of the panel include the director of children's services and elected members, as well as non executives of the PCT.
- In 2011 the Corporate Parenting Strategy review concluded that children with a plan for adoption should be profiled as a key theme for Herefordshire and in June 2011 the Head of Service for Looked After Children is presenting this to the council Joint Management Team, directors and partners in the council and PCT to drive forward the vision for this group of children.
- Complex legal delay is reported to the panel
- The Adoption Service maintains records of its work and ensures that legislative requirements governing the use and retention of information are adhered to.
- The assistant accountant for Safeguarding and Vulnerable Children meets regularly with the Nominated Manager to ensure the financial viability of the service.

- Records are kept of any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the Adoption Service.
- The Adoption Service annual report is made available across the Directorate to key stakeholders
- Herefordshire Adoption Service staff actively participate in regional organisations and Consortium groups to keep informed about adoption practice development for the benefit of its diverse customers

Monitoring of counselling and assessment of prospective adopters.

- All prospective adopters are given written information about the Council's complaints procedure in their initial information pack and about their right to apply to the Independent Review Mechanism.
- All prospective adopter/s are required to attend Herefordshire's 'Preparing to Adopt' course. Evaluation forms are provided at each session and direct feedback is sought by the Adoption Panel. Feedback is used to inform course development.
- An evaluation questionnaire about panel attendance and experience is available to all attendees including social workers and feedback from these is provided to panel to review its practices.
- On the granting of an Adoption Order all adopters are asked to complete a comprehensive questionnaire on their experience of the service offered by the agency.

Monitoring of child's adoption plan.

- Regular meetings of the Looked After Children, Young People and Specialist Services management team are held to consider the progress of permanence plans for children unable to remain within their families.
- The Professional Advisor to the Adoption Panel and Panel Co-ordinator monitor the progress of all children booked into the panel for potential consideration of a plan for adoption.
- Close liaison between Legal Services and the Professional Advisor ensure children's plans are not delayed by lack of panel time; additional panels are arranged where necessary.
- Reports of any disruption of adoptive placements are shared with the Adoption Panel.
- The need for birth parents to receive independent counselling on adoption issues and the benefits of referral for specialist independent support are emphasised to child and family social workers.
- Children with a plan for adoption are subject to monitoring through the LAC review systems.

- Adoption panel are updated of the progress of children each month and the child's social worker and homefinder are invited to panel if a placement has not been identified within 9 months of authority to place for adoption.
- Child Permanence Reports are audited by the Professional Advisor to ensure consistent quality.
- Quality assurance forms are completed by Adoption Panel members on each case presented; comments are collated and fed back to team managers.
- Quality assurance forms completed by the Adoption Panel chair are read by the Agency Decision Maker alongside the panel recommendations.
- Training is periodically undertaken with the Looked After Children and Young People's Team to emphasise the multipurpose and explicit requirements of high quality Child Permanence Reports and Adoption Support Plans that address the lifelong needs of the adopted person.

Monitoring of assessment of adopter activities

- Where an adopter has been approved for over twelve months and not yet matched, a review of their approval takes place with the adoption team manager. If there is a significant change of circumstance the review report will be tabled at panel and the adopter/s invited to attend.
- Monitoring is in place to ensure that CRB checks and medical assessments remain valid for all approved and waiting prospective adopter/s.
- Monitoring of time taken from application to consideration at Adoption Panel takes place in supervision and is noted by the Adoption Panel and reported in the annual service Activity Report
- Quality assurance forms are completed by Adoption Panel members on each case presented; comments are collated and fed back to team managers.

4. Procedures for recruiting, preparing, assessing, approving and supporting prospective adopters.

The agreed policies and procedures governing the functioning of the Adoption Service are available on the Intranet and Internet.

The key features covered by the policies and procedures are highlighted below.

Recruitment, assessment and training

- In accordance with the Children Act 1989 the needs of the child are paramount when seeking adoptive family placements and the child's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of the adoption process.

- The main aim of all aspects of preparation will be to provide a responsive and informed resource in which the child can grow up in a secure and positive environment and reach their potential in all aspects of their lives.
- The needs of children who require adoptive placements are diverse and complex. In order to meet these needs, the Adoption Service will work flexibly and will be willing to consider all options that offer the potential to provide a suitable adoptive home for a child.
- The Adoption Service will respond positively to applications to become adopters from people of all backgrounds, cultures, disability status, sexuality, marital status and religion in order to provide the maximum opportunity for children to be successfully adopted.
- Applications from foster carers who are already caring for a child where adoption is the plan will be welcomed. They will receive counselling and be treated as all new applicants with participation in preparation training to inform about the additional tasks of adoptive parenting.
- Our responsibility to maintain a child's safety and privacy means that it is not appropriate to place many Herefordshire children within the county. We therefore welcome prospective applicants from neighbouring authorities to enable us to place Herefordshire children with families assessed and supported by Herefordshire Adoption Service.
- We recognise that there is a national need for adoptive families and welcome applications from those able to meet the more complex needs of children such as large sibling groups, children with disabilities and older children. If we feel unable to prioritise a particular application we will signpost prospective applicants to other agencies.
- Information about the particular needs of children requiring adoption will be used to recruit prospective adopter/s to ensure well prepared adoptive placements within a timescale that is suitable to the needs of the child waiting.
- Where a placement cannot be identified from within its own resources the Adoption Service will look to the West Midlands Regional Family Placement Consortium approved adopter/s, the National Adoption Register, other local authorities and specialist adoption agencies.
- Approved adopter/s are encouraged to attend regional and national 'Exchange Days'.
- Specialist advertising is undertaken at an early stage for children where experience indicates greater delays will be experienced pre adoption e.g. White/ Black British children or sibling groups of 3 or more children.
- Herefordshire remains dependent on Interagency placement with families assessed, approved and supported by other Adoption Agencies. Efforts are made to place within two hours travelling distance to minimise distress during transitions and ensure support from known social workers. Adoption Support service provision is carefully detailed in an Adoption Support Plan when placing children outside the county and multi agency commitment is required.

Its provisions are reviewed at each statutory review and at the request of the adoptive parent/s.

- Enquirers who are still having investigations or treatment in the hope of achieving a pregnancy will be advised that they cannot proceed until the treatment has ended. Given the prevalence of loss issues for children where adoption is the plan it is essential that the applicants are as emotionally robust as possible and have come to recognise and accept their infertility.
- During the initial assessment home visit the social worker will ensure the enquirer is fully informed of the assessment process and timescales.
- A great deal of time will be taken at the outset in informing the enquirer about the particular additional needs of children waiting for adoption to ensure they have a growing understanding of the children's backgrounds, and the implications for their future.
- An initial assessment makes a recommendation about the suitability of the enquirer to make an application. The decision is made by the Adoption Service Manager in consultation with the assessing social worker. Possible outcomes include accepting an application, provision of additional counselling, delaying or counselling out of the individuals
- Where a joint application is made it is a requirement that both applicants will attend the preparation course. If there are specific difficulties arising from this requirement the matter will be raised with the Adoption Service Manager for consideration.
- 'Preparing to Adopt' courses are usually run twice yearly in Hereford.
- Applicants' identity is verified at the point of application through the completion of CRB disclosure forms.
- The Adoption Service may request that the outcome of medical assessment by the Agency Medical advisor is completed before considering whether to accept an application to adopt.
- Where a serious medical condition becomes apparent once an application has been accepted and this is assessed as being detrimental to the ability of the applicant to meet the needs of a 'Looked After' child a brief report would be taken to the panel if the applicant does not accept the recommendation to withdraw from the assessment process.
- In these situations and where a qualifying determination is reached, the applicant/s are advised of their right to apply to the Independent Review Mechanism.
- On completion of the preparation course a social worker is allocated in order to begin the assessment. The worker will set out a schedule of appointments in advance.
- In the event that there are social work capacity issues in allocating quickly priority will be given to individuals or partnerships whose initial assessment would indicate a high likelihood of matching with children waiting for

placement. Where this cannot be achieved a social worker who is known to the applicant will remain the link person to ensure support whilst waiting

- During the assessment the social worker will ensure that they:
 - a) Request 3 nominated referees from each applicant, two friends and one family member, obtain written references from them and select two to interview, one of whom is a relative.
 - b) In the case of a joint application each adult will be interviewed alone at least once
 - c) Applicants are advised that they need to provide a full chronology of their employment history, addresses and name change use.
 - d) Where applicants are employed or are engaged in voluntary work with children a reference will be obtained.
 - e) Employment references will be taken for all applicants. The timing of this can be at the late stages in the assessment where the individual is concerned about employment implications once their employer is informed of their plan to adopt.
 - f) Where any applicant has co-parented children in a former relationship the social worker will be required to approach and take a reference from their former partner.
 - g) All household members are interviewed including children and the following checks are completed; Enhanced Criminal Bureau; Local Authority Safeguarding and area checks and education department where applicants have children, SSAFFA where appropriate.
 - h) Provide information about the Independent Review Mechanism and Herefordshire Council's Complaints and Compliments Service.
 - i) Verify periods of extended absence outside the UK.
- Where any significant concerns arise during assessment the social worker will present a Brief Report to the adoption panel. The applicant will be encouraged to attend and make their own representation to the panel.
- When the full information has been gathered and analysed, the social worker will prepare the Prospective Adopters Report (PAR), providing this to the applicant/s for review with the exception of confidential material. (This would include the statutory reference details, interviews and reports from referees and the medical advisor's comments)
- The applicant/s will receive a copy of the PAR and be asked to sign it to confirm they have read its contents and provide feedback about its contents and the process of assessment. Applicants are invited to forward their comments within 10 days to the Adoption Agency.
- Applicants are invited to attend the Adoption Panel in order to address any questions themselves. Not all applicants may wish to attend and they are entitled to waive their right to do so. Applicants will be informed of the panel's recommendation to the Agency by the panel chair.
- The Agency's decision will be made within 7 working days of receipt of the panel's recommendation and final panel minutes and applicants will be informed orally within 2 working days and in writing within 5 working days.

- The legal requirement is that any anyone applying to the court for an adoption order must be at least 21 yrs of age. Whilst there is no legal upper age limit applicants need the physical and emotional energy to be able to care for a child throughout their childhood and beyond.

Inter Country Adoption

- The Adoption Duty Social Worker will provide initial information to enquirers living in Herefordshire and inform them of the difference between domestic adoption and adoption of a child from overseas and the costs involved. An information pack will be provided. Applicants will be expected to identify from which country they wish to adopt.
- Where the service undertakes an assessment of applicants wishing to adopt a child from outside the United Kingdom a set charge is made for the work involved, half to be paid when an application is accepted and the remainder prior to presentation to the Adoption Panel. Where a subsequent match and supervision is required the agency will make additional charges to cover the costs to the Adoption Service.
- Where people are seeking to adopt a child who is a relative from overseas the set fee will usually apply although the Adoption Service may reduce or waive the fee in exceptional circumstances.
- Intercountry adoptive applicants are encouraged to attend a specialist preparation course run by the Intercountry Adoption Centre, but may also attend the Herefordshire 'Preparing to adopt' course.
- The process of assessment for those wishing to adopt from overseas is as outlined for prospective adopters above, but applicants will be expected to evidence how they will promote the cultural, racial and religious heritage of their child.

Support to placements pre and post Adoption Order

- Following assessment and approval all prospective adoptive parents will have an allocated adoption social worker. Once a placement has been made the child's social worker will be involved in supervising the child in placement as required by adoption legislation. The focus of supervision is to promote secure attachments for the child with guidance being provided from both social workers.
- Children placed for adoption are subject to statutory reviews under the Adoption Agencies Regulations. This involves an independent reviewing officer to ensure that all aspects of the child's welfare and care plans for his / her future are progressing satisfactorily.
- The education and achievement of children with a plan for adoption is actively promoted; all children of school age have Personal Education Plans which are reviewed as required and at least 6 monthly. Children's views are sought

and achievements recorded. Out of school activities and educational trips are provided.

- Adopted children are identified as a vulnerable group in the schools admission protocol and thus given priority.
- It is a requirement that the child's allocated social worker prepares or commissions the preparation for each child of a Life Book, and Later Life Letter that includes advice on how to access their adoption file and care records.
- In order to meet a child's needs throughout their life, their adoptive parent/s must have access to the fullest information about the child's pre adoption history. The child's adoption case record will be made available to the adopter's social worker and arrangements will be made for the adopter/s to meet with those able to provide information about the child. This may be done on an individual basis i.e through a meeting with the agency medical advisor and birth family members, or through a Child Appreciation event.
- Where an adoption placement ends in an unplanned way or there is imminent danger of it doing so, the service will convene a meeting to consider the circumstances and to help with planning for the future. Reports of the subsequent Disruption Meeting are considered by Adoption Panel to ensure they inform future service development.
- The Agency recognises the need to be flexible in arranging comprehensive support to adoption placements. In order to achieve this an Adoption Support Plan is compiled for each child placed with details of the support to be provided, including financial support.
- Adoption Support plans are routinely reviewed during the pre adoption order period and can be requested to be reviewed at any point by the adoptive parent/s.
- All adoptive parents eligible for adoption support services from Herefordshire Adoption Agency who contact the agency requesting a service will be offered the opportunity to talk to an adoption social worker. Advice, information and counselling will be provided or a 'one-off' service may be provided by the adoption support social worker.
- Where unexpected challenges arise and adoptive parents request an adoption support assessment every effort will be made to maximise universal service provision through the 'No Wrong Door' and 'Edge of Care' initiatives. The level of needs pathway enables specialist advice and guidance to be drawn in from the adoption service without the need for an additional assessment.
- Where on-going specific adoption support is indicated, an assessment will be undertaken in consultation with the family and partner agencies and a draft plan drawn up. Notice of the proposed provision of services will be given in writing to the person assessed and they will be invited to make representations before a final decision is made. In some cases a multi agency adoption support meeting will be convened in order to facilitate and review the plan. The format and content of the review will depend on the circumstances

of the case and need not always necessitate direct contact between the local authority and the adoptive parent, but may be limited to an exchange of correspondence.

- On occasions it will be necessary to sensitively support adoptive families in making separate daily living arrangements for their child or young person. Every effort is made to maintain a link for the adopted child or young person.
- Comprehensive guidance and support is provided to assist all parties to engage in effective contact that meets the changing needs of children throughout their childhood and into adulthood.
- There is particular attention to contact arrangement where siblings are placed separately. Some direct contact arrangements are actively managed but wherever possible once face to face contact is progressing well the agency will withdraw.
- A newsletter is produced twice a year to keep adoptive families informed of adoption related topics or events.
- Opportunities for contact with other adopters and other adoptive children are provided through a range of events e.g. Support groups, and Family Fun Days.
- Adoptive families are provided with information and encouraged to access the resources provided by adoption organisations such as Adoption UK; the Adoption Service will provide free membership to a limited number of adoptive families each year

Services for adopted adults.

- The Adoption Service has considered the need to provide advice and guidance to young people approaching 18 years, including the opportunity to extend letterbox arrangements. The service has information available for adopted young adults about managing an approach from a birth family member and registering a veto.
- Where significant concerns are present for the adopted young person referral to 'Adoption Support' can provide effective Intermediary Services and assist and counsel about issues including vetoes.
- The Adoption Service provides a counselling service to adult adoptees who wish to seek information about their birth family in accordance with schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
- Following initial counselling the adoptee/ adult affected by adoption is encouraged to access the services of 'Adoption Support' for tracing and Intermediary Services.
- The Adoption Service has established processes to register veto requests from adopted adults.

Services for birth relatives.

- The Adoption Service will provide information to birth family members about current day adoption practice and its implications and will encourage birth parents to be involved in planning for their child's adoption through contributing to the Child Permanence Report, commenting on what is written about them and recording their wishes for their child's upbringing.
- Birth parents are kept informed of the progress of plans for their children and decisions are conveyed to them in a timely and sensitive way.
- Birth parents are encouraged and supported to meet their child's adoptive parents.
- The Adoption Service actively promotes the exchange of information through Letterbox agreements. Adopters and birth family members are reminded to forward news in a timely way and efforts will always be made to initiate new arrangements and review historic arrangements to meet the changing circumstances of all users.
 - The Adoption Service signposts birth parents for assistance and specialist counselling to Adoption Support (an Independent Adoption Support Agency) in line with its requirements under the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
 - Prompts are in place at every stage of the adoption process to remind birth relatives of available services.

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Note: Pending cabinet ratification on 16th June 2011.