

**HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL
ADOPTION AGENCY**

**STATEMENT OF PURPOSE
August 2015**

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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 Minimum 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 as soon as possible 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.
- 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 parenting tasks of adoption.
- Adopted children and their parents 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's Wellbeing directorate 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 and nationally.
- Counselling, information and support for birth parents who have lost or are at risk of losing their children to adoption.
- Counselling, information and support for pregnant women and parents who are considering placing their child/ren for adoption.
- Counselling for adopted adults in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Those wanting intermediary services to trace birth relatives are signposted elsewhere.

- 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.
- Assessment of the support needs of adoptive families and provision of services before 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 AdoptWestMids 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. Adoption service staff

Hilary Hale has been the registered manager of the adoption service and adoption support services advisor (ASSA) since August 2006. She has extensive experience as a children and families social worker and manager, is an adoptive parent and the professional advisor to the adoption panel.

- In the absence of the registered manager, the adoption team manager Gill Smith will deputise. Responsibility for the service rests with the head of service for looked after children and young people.
- Social workers preparing reports in relation to prospective adopters, 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). The 5.84 full time equivalent adoption social workers meet this requirement and are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council.
- 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 core staff group with a wide range of experience in the field of child care 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.

- 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 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 service undertake regular safeguarding and data protection 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.

Feedback is regularly sought from service users and used to improve services provided. The adoption panel provides independent quality assurance on practice and reports presented. Six monthly reports on adoption performance are presented to cabinet. Adoption services are inspected and rated by Ofsted as part of their inspections of services for children in need of help and protection, looked after children and care leavers.

Service planning information

- The nominated manager of the adoption service is a core member of the legal gateway 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 service manager works closely with other managers within the looked after children's service, independent reviewing officers and the performance team to ensure tracking of children's cases where adoption has been identified as a potential plan. Securing permanence for children unable to return to their original families is a key priority.
- 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 provide a forum for the independent panel chair to bring to the attention of the agency decision maker issues of quality assurance in terms of delay and practice.
- Bi- annual reports of the adoption service's activities, management and performance are presented to the senior management team and executive of the council and to key stakeholders.

- Protecting children and giving them a great start in life is a council priority. The timeliness of permanence planning for children is demonstrated through the numbers of children placed for adoption and the DfE adoption scorecards.
- The adoption service maintains records of its work and ensures that legislative requirements governing the use and retention of information are adhered to. All members of the service undertake data protection training.
- The assistant accountant for children's wellbeing 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 and policy and practice are updated to improve the service.
- Adoption service staff actively participate in regional organisations and consortia groups to keep informed about adoption practice development for the benefit of its diverse customers.

Monitoring of recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters

- All prospective adopters are directed to/given written information about the council's complaints procedure and about their right to apply to the independent review mechanism (IRM).
- All prospective adopters are required to attend 'Preparing to Adopt' training which is provided in partnership with Worcestershire adoption service. Evaluation forms are provided at each session and direct feedback is sought by the adoption panel. Feedback is used to inform course development.
- Timeliness of response to enquirers and throughout the approval process is measured and reported to the adoption panel and executive of the council.
- An evaluation questionnaire about panel attendance and experience is provided to all attendees including social workers and feedback from these is presented 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

- Children with a plan for adoption are monitored through the LAC review system by independent reviewing officers and regular 'rag rating', auditing and tracking.

- Close liaison between children's teams and the professional advisor ensure sufficient time for consideration of adoption plans by the agency decision maker (ADM).
- Should a placement disrupt prior to an adoption order being granted, a meeting is convened to investigate and learn and reports are shared with the adoption panel and agency decision maker.
- The need for birth parents to receive independent counselling and support is emphasised to independent reviewing officers and children's social workers.

Child permanence reports (CPRs) and adoption support plans are prepared by suitably qualified social workers, endorsed by their supervisors and quality assured by the professional advisor to ensure consistent quality.

- Comments on the quality of reports and presentation by panel members are collated and fed back to supervisors to improve practice and feed into staff appraisals.
- Training is periodically undertaken with the looked after children's teams to emphasise the multipurpose and explicit requirements of high quality CPRs and adoption support plans that acknowledge the lifelong impact of early trauma and neglect.

Monitoring of adopter activities

- Timescales for responding to initial enquirers, accepting registrations of interest and completion of the two stages of the assessment process are collated and reported in nationally published data.
- All approved adopters are referred to the national Adoption Register if no potential match has been identified within three months of approval.
- Where an adopter has been approved for over twelve months and has not been matched with a child, a review of their approval takes place with the adoption service manager. If there is a significant change of circumstance the review report is considered by the adoption panel and the adopter/s invited to attend.
- Monitoring is in place to ensure that DBS checks and medical assessments remain valid for all approved and waiting prospective adopter/s.
- Quality assurance comments by adoption panel members on each case presented are collated and fed back to supervisors.

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 and Adoption and Children Act 2002 the needs of the child throughout their life are paramount when seeking adoptive family placements and the child's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of the adoption process. The adoption system exists to serve vulnerable children, rather than adults who wish to adopt.
- The main aim of all aspects of preparation is to provide a lifelong family where a child will 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 be creative and flexible and will be willing to consider all enquiries 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.
- Our responsibility to maintain a child's safety and confidentiality means that it is often not appropriate to place Herefordshire children for adoption 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.
- Where it is supported by the social work teams, applications from foster carers who are already caring for a child whose plan is adoption, will be welcomed. They will be offered counselling and training/information particular to their circumstances and their assessments will be 'fast-tracked' to panel as will those who have adopted previously.
- 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, older children and those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. If we feel unable to prioritise a particular application we will signpost prospective applicants to other agencies.
- Enquirers who are still having investigations or treatment in the hope of achieving a pregnancy will be advised that we will not accept an application until the treatment has ceased and they have come to terms with this. Given the prevalence of loss issues for children where adoption is the plan it is essential that applicants are as emotionally robust as possible and have come to recognise and accept their infertility.
- Information about the particular needs of children requiring adoption will be used to recruit prospective adopters to ensure well prepared adoptive

placements within a timescale that is suitable to the needs of the children waiting.

- Where a placement cannot be identified from within its own resources the adoption service will look to neighbouring authorities, the AdoptWestMids Consortium, the national Adoption Register, other local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. The payment of an inter agency fee will not be an impediment to the placement of children within the shortest possible timescale appropriate to their needs.
- Approved adopters are encouraged to be proactive in identifying potential matches and to attend regional and national 'exchange days' and adoption activity days.
- Specialist profiling is undertaken at an early stage for children where experience indicates there may be delays in identifying a placement e.g. older children, children with complex needs or sibling groups of 3 or more children.
- Herefordshire welcomes interagency placements with families assessed, approved and supported by other adoption agencies. Efforts are made to place Herefordshire children within two hours travelling distance to minimise difficulties 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 or at the request of the adoptive parent/s.
- There is a legal requirement that anyone applying to the court for an adoption order must be at least 21 yrs of age. We welcome applications from those with previous parenting experience and those of any age with the physical and emotional energy to care for a child throughout their childhood and beyond.
- Time will be taken at the outset to inform the enquirer about the particular additional needs of children waiting for adoption to ensure they have an understanding of the children's backgrounds and experiences and the implications for their future.
- A decision on whether to accept a registration of interest from an enquirer in the pre assessment stage is made by the adoption team manager within 5 days.
- Within 5 working days of acceptance of the registration of interest and in partnership with a member of the adoption team, applicants will complete a stage 1 agreement to statutory checks, references, medicals and information/training to be provided. This is a 'sifting stage' led by the applicants, but guided by the adoption service. It is expected that stage 1 will be completed within 2 months, though acknowledged that longer may be needed by some applicants to complete their self evaluation.
- If as a result of information provided, the adoption manager considers applicants are unsuitable to proceed to stage 2, they will be informed of this in writing and advised of the complaints procedure.

- Applicants may take up to 6 months to decide whether they wish to proceed to stage 2, which is social worker led but guided by the prospective adopters. A further agreement will be completed with dates of training, assessment visits, and presentation of the prospective adopters report (PAR) to the adoption panel. It is expected that stage 2 will be completed within 4 months, but longer may be needed in some cases. The focus of the assessment will be the analysis of the strengths and capacities of the prospective adopters to meet the needs of children who have experienced trauma and loss and areas that may need development/further training.
- Where any significant concerns arise during assessment, the adoption manager may decide that the social worker should present a brief report to the adoption panel. The applicant/s will be encouraged to attend and make their own representation to panel which will recommend whether the assessment should continue.
- The applicant/s will receive a copy of the PAR and be asked to sign it to confirm its accuracy and provide any comments.
- 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 without this affecting the panel's ability to make a recommendation as to their suitability. 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.

Inter Country Adoption

- Many people believe they would not be able to adopt a young child in the UK and therefore seek to adopt a child from abroad. All enquirers will be asked whether they have considered adopting a looked after child in the UK and be given information about the children needing adoptive homes locally and nationally.
- 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. Applicants will be asked 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.
- Intercountry adoptive applicants are encouraged to access specialist information relating to their situation but will be required to attend the 'Preparing to adopt' training.
- 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

- During 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 visiting the child in placement as required by regulations. The focus 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/Care Planning Regulations. Independent reviewing officers ensure that all aspects of the child's welfare and care and support 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 (PEPs) 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 promoted.
- Adopted children are identified as a vulnerable group in the schools admission protocol and thus given priority. Adopters are informed of their child's entitlement to an enhanced pupil premium to support their education.
- It is a requirement that the child's allocated social worker prepares or commissions the preparation for each child of a life story 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, adoptive parents 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 adopters' 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 and/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 the 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 who contact the agency requesting a service will be offered the opportunity to talk to an adoption social worker. Advice, information and signposting to other partners will be provided or a 'one-off' service may be provided by the adoption social worker.
- 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.
- Where unexpected challenges arise and adoptive parents request an adoption support assessment every effort will be made to maximise universal service provision through CAFs, Multi Agency Groups 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.
- If specialist therapeutic support is assessed as required and is not available through statutory services, an application for funding from the nationally funded Adoption Support Fund will be considered.
- Sometimes 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 between the adopted child or young person and their family.
- 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 for adoption 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.
- The adoption service provides counselling 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 signposted to registered adoption support agencies for tracing and intermediary services.
- The adoption service has established processes to register veto requests from adopted adults.

Services for birth relatives

- Children's social workers and the adoption service provide information and counselling to birth family members about the adoption process and its implications for them and their child. Birth parents are encouraged to be involved in planning for their child's adoption through contributing to the child permanence report (CPR), 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 where it is considered appropriate.
- 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 are made to initiate new arrangements and review historic arrangements to meet the changing circumstances of all users, whilst maintaining the focus on the needs of the adopted child/young person.

- Prompts are in place at every stage of the adoption process to remind birth relatives of available services.

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