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Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the National Adopter Journey Practice Standards designed as part of our national programme of work to support the journey of prospective adopters from recruitment through to adoption.

Adoption has changed over the years and many of the children with a plan for adoption today will have experienced early trauma and loss, and most children will have multiple needs. As some of the most vulnerable children in our society they need stability, unconditional love, and support to help them achieve their potential. The welfare, safety and wellbeing of these children is central to all decision making during the adopter journey. A key responsibility, as adoption agencies, is to find families to meet these children's needs and in doing so effectively recruit, prepare, assess, approve, and support adopters to provide children with stability, unconditional love and support throughout their lives. How we help adopters gain a greater understanding of adoption, increase their knowledge and help them prepare for adoption at a psychological level, is a critical task alongside assessing their suitability to adopt, and this is not always an easy task.

Many adopters have said that the approval process can be challenging, with some feeling they are misunderstood and judged, and that whilst adopters find the process helpful, they do not always feel it prepares them well for the parenting task ahead¹. We do need to do better to modernise adoption, recruit adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds, and prepare and support families for those children who are older, sibling groups, children with multiple needs or disabilities, and children from Black and minoritised ethnic communities. The development of a trusting relationship between the prospective adopter and adoption professional is critical to ensure that the adoption process, whatever the outcome, is fair and balanced, and a renewed focus on the relational approach to working with adopters is important throughout their journey.

These standards have been produced with a cross-sector group of professionals as well as experts by experience, and I would like to thank everyone involved for their commitment to making a positive difference to the lives of children. I would like to pay a particular thanks to adoptive parents who have given their views generously in the spirit of learning and improving practice for others to come.

In producing these standards, we hope to provide adoption agencies with a framework and a tool to guide good practice and consistency across adoption agencies.

Sarah Johal MBE
National Adoption Strategic Lead



Introduction

The National Adopter Journey Practice Standards have been developed to provide clear expectations for good practice and to assist the sector to provide a more consistent, reliable, and supportive environment for prospective adopters.

The development of the standards have been undertaken by the adopter journey working group and overseen by the National Adoption Recruitment Programme Board. These groups are made up of representatives from: The Consortium for Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA), Home for Good, My Adoption Family, Adoption UK (AUK), New Family Social, regional and voluntary adoption agency staff. Insights and involvement from adopters, adopted people and birth parents shaped the standards, with wider consultation with Association of Directors of Childrens Services (ADCS) and CoramBAAF.

From the surveys and consultations commissioned in the development process of these standards, it was clear that the public found the messages about who could be approved to adopt very confusing and off-putting. Moreover, significant numbers of those who did come forward experienced the process itself as disempowering and unnecessarily difficult. The adoption recruitment and assessment process must be thorough and robust but should not be so alienating for prospective adopters. These standards have been produced to address these issues, provide a framework to guide good practice, and to encourage consistency across adoption agencies.

Footnotes

¹ Department for Education. *National Adoption Strategy, Achieving Excellence*, (gov.uk, 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-strategy-achieving-excellence-everywhere> [accessed 13 May 2024]



Key purpose

The purpose is to promote and shape effective adopter recruitment, preparation, and assessment processes and practice:



Achieve child-centered practice in adopter recruitment, preparation, and assessment.



Enable adopters to know what to expect from the assessment process.



Promote effective working partnerships across agencies.



Help standardise practice guidance and outcomes in delivery across agencies.



Promote confident and informed adopter recruitment, preparation, assessment, and support.



Be used as a dynamic tool to organise and strengthen local arrangements.

Relevant statutory regulations and guidance

The National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014

Adoption and Children's Act 2002 (as amended by Children and Families Act 2014)

Adoption Agency Regulations 2005

Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005

Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2005

Children and Families Act 2014

Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2013

Working Together 2023

Resources guide

Adoption UK (2021) *Barometer Report*.

Alper, J., and Howe, D., (eds.) (2017) *Assessing Adoptive Parents, Foster Carers and Kinship Carers*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Beek, M., Neil, E. and Schofield, G. (2021) *Moving to Adoption* CoramBAAF, London.

CoramBAAF (2023) *Cumbria safeguarding review briefing note*.

Corami (2023) *Adoption and Special Guardianship Data Collection*, Corami, London.

Cousins, J., (2010) *Pushing the Boundaries of Assessment: New techniques for preparing applicants and evidencing suitability*, London: BAAF.

Department for Education (2013) *Adoption statutory guidance* London.

Lewis, S., and Selwyn, J. (2021) *The Views and Experiences of Approved Adopters in Five Regional Adoption Agencies*, Rees Centre: University of Oxford.

Poore, J., and Simmonds, J. (2021) *Assessment of Adopters: A Literature Review*, Rees Centre: CoramBAAF, London.

Implementation and governance

The Adopter Journey Practice Standards are a framework to guide good practice and promote standardisation across all agencies. They purposely exclude identification of specific roles and responsibilities and/or timelines for completion of tasks. The implementation

and governance arrangements for Adopter Journey practice should be developed locally across regional partnerships to include roles, responsibilities, and timeframes. The standards will be reviewed to incorporate experience of their use and any new sector changes.

National Adopter Journey Practice Standards

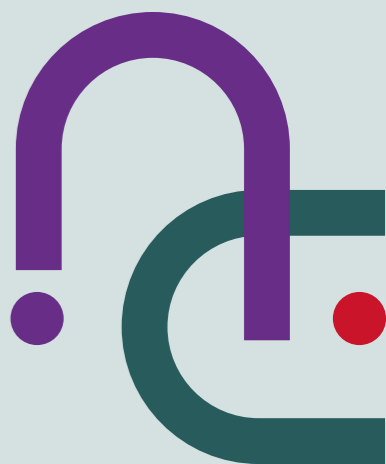


Standard 1

Principles underpinning effective processes and practice throughout the Adopter Journey.

S1. All professionals, including practitioners, managers and leaders across all organisations, take active responsibility to ensure inclusive and anti-discriminatory delivery of practice.

- 1.1 The child to be potentially placed with adopters, remains central to decision making at all times throughout the adoption process.
- 1.2 All staff work and adhere to the timescales and processes as set out in the regulations and guidance.
- 1.3 Agencies promote an affirming, inclusive culture that encourages openness and acceptance of diversity.
- 1.4 All staff commit to anti-discriminatory practice, and receive up to date training in equality, diversity and inclusion issues, including current research evidence to increase knowledge, raise awareness and improve practice.
- 1.5 All staff have a good understanding of their knowledge and awareness of 'own' values, and an understanding of the impacts of discrimination are embedded in practice by all.
- 1.6 Organisations work to create 'safe spaces' where staff are supported to discuss and continue to develop their knowledge and awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion issues.
- 1.7 All individuals feel able to recognise and challenge discrimination, including micro aggressions, and to support those impacted.
- 1.8 All agencies work in partnership to secure the best interests of the child in accordance with their roles and responsibilities. Multi-agency processes are clear and transparent.



Standard 2

The enquiry Stage One of the adoption process welcomes and enables all those considering adoption to find out more.

S2. Prospective adopters are treated consistently and professionally from their first point of contact with the agency through to acceptance of their registration of interest.

- 2.1 All initial inquiries receive prompt and consistent responses, regardless of the contact method used. Potential adopters are provided with guidance on the next steps and how to access additional information. Collaborative policies are in place among agencies to guarantee uniform and best practice-based responses to inquiries.
- 2.2 All prospective adopters making initial enquiries are invited to information events, which are held regularly and involve experienced adopter(s).
- 2.3 'Getting ready to Adopt' information/tools and adoption journey processes/timelines are clearly outlined and accessible through agencies' websites, and available at information evenings. All prospective adopters are supported to understand the assessment process and potential timelines.
- 2.4 Agency expertise and experience, including any peer or specialist support services offered, are detailed on websites and publicity materials to help prospective adopters to make informed decisions.
- 2.5 Information regarding the needs, requirements and characteristics of children in need of adoption is readily accessible on websites and in publicity materials. Specifically, details are provided about adopting children with multiple needs, sibling groups, older children, and children from Black and minority backgrounds.
- 2.6 Websites and other promotional materials actively promote cultural diversity and inclusion using signs, symbols, images, and narrative.
- 2.7 'Myth busting' information is promoted through websites, social media and at events to provide accurate information, build trust and mitigate fears.
- 2.8 Prospective adopters are given the contact details of a named person/team in the agency as a source of further information or support.
- 2.9 Diversity of prospective adopters is viewed positively and is actively encouraged and supported by all staff through a strength-based approach.
- 2.10 Prospective adopters are supported and encouraged to submit their registration of interest at the point they are ready to start the adoption assessment.

Standard 3

Prospective adopters are treated professionally and supported throughout Stage One of the process.

S3. Agencies balance the need to consistently inform, support and nurture prospective adopters with the need to undertake statutory checks.

- 3.1 Initial visits (face-to-face) are carried out with all adopters who formally register an expression of interest and, if accepted, a Stage One Agreement agreed and completed.
- 3.2 Preparation groups are held to support applicants' learning and include content referred to in regulations and statutory guidance. Signposting to other resources and opportunities to build peer networks will be included in the preparation group.
- 3.3 Prospective adopters are supported through Stage One using a tailored approach and a range of resources adaptable to individual needs.
- 3.4 Prospective adopters are provided with preparation training and resources to help them understand the needs of the children who need adoption and the consequential therapeutic parenting approaches. At a minimum this should include: early permanence, characteristics and needs of available children, child development, effects of trauma on children, therapeutic parenting, adoption support, legal process of adoption, adoption timeline, linking and matching, attachment, taking care of yourself (resilience), staying in touch with birth family, and importance of identity.
- 3.5 Prospective adopters are signposted to comprehensive resources that are accessible and relevant, and supported to actively learn about the experiences of children needing adoption and therapeutic parenting outside of the formal training sessions.
- 3.6 All prospective adopters are encouraged to learn about and be open to the possibility of early permanence and siblings, whilst understanding that if during assessment it becomes clear this is not the most appropriate route for them, they can opt out at any time.
- 3.7 Experienced adopters, adopted people and birth families are involved in the delivery of information sessions and preparation groups, and are available for discussions.
- 3.8 Written references are obtained from personal referees, and referees contacted and verified in line with regulations. A mix of references is sought to ensure different phases of the applicant's life are covered and referees given details of how to contact the assessment team independently should they wish to do so.
- 3.9 Ex-partner references are obtained where children have been co-parented. Prospective adopters understand and have the opportunity to contribute to and be supported through this process.
- 3.10 Prospective adopters have a single point of contact within the agency to support them throughout Stage One.
- 3.11 Prospective adopters are visited at the end of Stage One to either notify them of their suitability to progress on to Stage Two or to provide reasons why the agency considers them unsuitable to progress. The agency will ensure that prospective adopters are supported at all stages of this process.

Standard 4

Prospective adopters are treated professionally and supported through Stage Two of the assessment process.

S4. **Agencies balance the need to inform, support and nurture prospective adopters whilst consistently and robustly exploring their suitability to adopt.**

- 4.1 Prospective adopters who successfully conclude Stage One and wish to progress, agree and complete a Stage Two Agreement with the agency.
- 4.2 The assessing social worker maintains professional curiosity throughout the assessment, evidencing any self-reported information through a variety of sources including personal observation, references and triangulation.
- 4.3 Children living in the household are fully included in the assessment process. The social worker uses observation and direct work to ascertain the child's thoughts and feelings about potential siblings and their current lived experience in the home. Consideration is given to allocating existing children in the family their own support worker.
- 4.4 The assessment process recognises that the basis of all assessments is the relationship between the assessing social worker and the applicants, and that the relational aspects of the work between applicants and the assessing social worker can be both a supportive factor as well as a hindrance .
- 4.5 Prospective adopters are supported to build on their learning from preparation sessions and further explore topics such as: the needs of brothers and sisters, early permanence, therapeutic parenting, practical parenting and maintaining relationships. Prospective adopters are supported to understand the complex range of difficulties children may have, the potential impact these can have on them as parents and the need for self-care and support.
- 4.6 If during assessment there are concerns about a prospective adopter's suitability to adopt, these are shared openly and transparently with them and they are given the opportunity to respond. Second opinion visits are used to support assessments and triangulate information where there are any areas of concern, or which need clarification.
- 4.7 Assessments follow a strength-based approach to ensure that difference is positively valued. The assessment process itself allows prospective adopters to develop and demonstrate their true potential.
- 4.8 Training and preparation groups for friends and family are offered to educate, support, and build relationships with the assessing team. Family network meetings are also used to establish the support that family members can offer the prospective adopters.
- 4.9 Agencies must ensure that their record-keeping is compliant with GDPR and the Adoption Agency Regulations, and prospective adopters are made aware of the policies and procedures in place to ensure compliance.

- 4.10 All professionals recognise the potential importance of the information kept on people accessing their records in the future in terms of accuracy, use of language and coherence of the narrative.
- 4.11 Ongoing support is available for prospective adopters after completion of their assessment report and before panel.
- 4.12 Practitioners ensure that the 'prospective adopter report' provides analysis of the information within the report and a clear indication of whether the prospective adopters are considered suitable to adopt.



Standard 5

Prospective adopters are treated professionally and supported through the Adoption Panel process.

S5. Agencies recognise the challenges of the panel process for prospective adopters and the need to support them, whilst enabling consistent and robust quality assurance.

- 5.1 Panel paperwork is prepared and given to the Agency Adviser and Panel Administrator in line with agency guidelines to give sufficient time for robust quality assurance and review.
- 5.2 Prospective adopters are always invited to the Adoption Panel, although it is also made clear to them that non-attendance will not prejudice the panel's recommendation. If they choose to attend, they are given a guide to the panel prior to the meeting.
- 5.3 Prospective adopters are supported before, during and after attendance at panel.
- 5.4 Prospective adopters should feel that the Adoption Panel reflects their own diversity and identity, as far as possible.
- 5.5 Prospective adopters are informed of the panel's recommendation and its reasons verbally, immediately after the meeting. However, it must be made clear that the agency's decision-maker makes the final decision.
- 5.6 Prospective adopters are given the opportunity and encouraged to give feedback about their experience of the assessment process.
- 5.7 Prospective adopters are given information about the independent review mechanism and their right to apply should they be deemed as unsuitable to adopt.

Standard 6

The linking and matching process identifies those children the approved adopters are best suited to parent.

S6. All prospective adopters are supported to engage with the linking and matching process and are treated consistently and professionally throughout.

- 6.1 All approved adopters can expect the same process for identifying a potential link and have choice about how they engage with that process. Systems and professionals recognise that linking and matching is relational, and a highly emotional and stressful process for all involved.
- 6.2 Approved adopters are prepared for and aware of how the linking and matching process will work through training, discussion and practical guides.
- 6.3 The agency ensures that the matching plan agreements are completed and reviewed regularly with approved adopters to ensure there is a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved.
- 6.4 Approved adopters are supported to access profiling events, activity days or similar routes to potential matches.
- 6.5 All approved adopters are supported to fully understand the child's background, health, emotional and developmental needs, and the practical implications for parenting that child before they agree for the match to be presented to the adoption panel. It is good practice for the medical adviser to meet with the prospective adopter to share all appropriate health information, discussing the needs of the children with whom they are matched, and have adequate time to reflect on the information.
- 6.6 All approved adopters are given full and complete information about their child's history and potential/likely needs.
- 6.7 Approved adopters are given the opportunity to meet with foster carers and visit nursery or school (wherever appropriate) and others who may be able to offer an important perspective on the child, including extended birth family members where appropriate.
- 6.8 Child appreciation days take place for children being placed for adoption, when possible, as part of celebrating the child's life but also to share their life story with prospective adopters to provide a holistic overview of the child's early life and experiences.



Standard 7

Introductions and the adoption court order application process are managed effectively.

S7. **Agencies and professionals enable and support adopters to begin the process of building relationships and creating a new family unit with the child, with prospective adopters being supported and treated consistently and professionally throughout the process.**

- 7.1 Transitions are child-centered, and adopters are supported through this phase by their allocated worker. The University of East Anglia 'Moving to Adoption Model' provides a good practice, research-based model for transitions.
- 7.2 Foster carers are suitably trained and supported in their role around introductions and the child's transition to live with their adopters.
- 7.3 A mid-way review of introductions is held (in person where possible), and includes all those involved in the transition, including the child's social worker, foster carers and adopters. The views of any existing children of the adopters are also considered.
- 7.4 The child's needs for maintaining significant relationships are fully considered, clearly reasoned and agreed with those responsible for supporting and reviewing on-going staying in touch arrangements. Wherever possible, birth family members and prospective adopters should be offered the opportunity to meet.
- 7.5 The roles of the adopter's social worker, the child's social worker and Independent Reviewing Officer are clearly understood, and the schedule of all visits to the child is clearly understood by all involved.
- 7.6 Adopters are supported to submit their application for adoption court order when the time is right for them and their child/children.
- 7.7 Life story books are provided by the time the adoption court order is made. They should include references to all those people who have been identified as important to the child.

- 6.9 Family Network Days are considered to help the wider family reflect on how they will be able to support the approved adopters and meet the individual child's needs.
- 6.10 Staying in touch plans are child-centred and bespoke. At the time of care planning and matching all options for staying in touch, including digital platforms, are considered as well as the risks of not staying in touch. Professionals avoid a 'one size fits all' approach.
- 6.11 Any approved adopters waiting to be linked are systematically reviewed in line with regulations. The need to update medical reports will follow the briefing note issued by CoramBAAF on the implications of the Cumbria Child Safeguarding Practice Review.
- 6.12 All prospective adopters will have an adoption support plan agreed before a match is presented to the Adoption Panel. These plans include details of identified and anticipated support needs with comprehensive clarity regarding how the support will be provided, including staying in touch arrangements and any therapeutic and/or financial support packages that may be offered.
- 6.13 Professionals ensure that the prospective adopters fully understand and are committed to the child's need to stay in touch with their birth family/significant others, and ensure that the child's specific needs can be met by the proposed match.
- 6.14 The child's birth first name should be retained in all but exceptional circumstances.
- 6.15 Approved adopters waiting to be linked have a designated practitioner or team to contact for on-going support.



Glossary of terms as used in the standards

Adoption Order – an order made by the court on an application under section 50 or 51 giving parental responsibility for a child to the adopters or adopter.

Adoption Panel – make a recommendation on the proposed placement of a child with particular prospective adopters.

Adoption Support Plan – refers to the requirement to ensure each child has a clear and updated support plan to enable their wellbeing and specific support needs to be met throughout the early and on-going phases of their development.

Agency Advisor – provides professional advice to the Agency Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

Birth parents – the child's biological parents up until the granting of an Adoption Order, and their biological parents throughout their life course.

Care planning – Local Authority process of childcare planning including a twin track plan.

Child Appreciation Days – also known as Life Appreciation Days, enable prospective adopters to meet with significant people from a child's past, offering a unique way of gaining an understanding of the child's view of the world, how their past experiences have affected their current behaviour, and the potential impact of a move into a new family for the child or other transition on all concerned.

Child Permanence Report (CPR) – the primary document used to reach the decision that the child 'should be placed for adoption', and used to help prospective adopters understand the needs and background of a child.

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) – a statutory agency that represents children in family court cases in England and advises the family courts about what is safe for children and in their best interests.

Digital platforms – these could be family finding databases and/or electronic systems in place to facilitate staying in touch arrangements.

Early Permanence (EP) – an umbrella term covering Concurrency and Fostering for Adoption placements. Both retain the potential for a child to be reunified to their family depending on specific care plans and circumstances and the outcome of the final court decision.

Family Court (the Court) – has jurisdiction in England to issue a Placement Order for a child and deals with all family law matters in relation to children and families.

GDPR – an acronym for the General Data Protection Regulation which is the implementation of The Data Protection Act 2018 and a piece of European legislation that protects personal information. It outlines several requirements businesses must follow to process that data legally, regulations relating to information, a direct marketing code of practice, and for connected purposes.

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) – a registered social worker with an independent role of the LA to monitor care plans to meet the child's current needs, listen and advocate with and for the child and conduct regular reviews.

Life story work – an approach to helping children understand their journey from birth, through care, and permanency.

Linking – when there is a potential adoptive family identified that is being explored for the child.

Local Authority (LA) – public body with responsibility for the child where adoption is a possible outcome of care planning.

Matching – the process where a child is matched with approved prospective adopters who can best meet the child's needs.

Placement Order – a court order that gives the Local Authority permission to formally arrange for a child to live with people approved as prospective adopters. They can do this even if the child's parents do not agree.

Practitioner – any professional involved in the family finding/planning of adoption for the child.

Prospective adopter(s)/adoptive parents – an individual/couple who is/are approved by an adoption agency as suitable to adopt a child and have a child placed with them by an adoption agency.

Prospective Adopters Report – an assessment required by legislation providing a comprehensive picture of prospective adopters, the experiences, skills and values that they are bringing to the adoption role and any support they may need to provide a loving, secure and stable home to a looked after child or children. Agencies may use a range of different templates for this and it can also be called the adopter assessment report

Public Law Outline (PLO) – the legislative framework within which child proceedings must be dealt with including pre-proceeding duties. It can be the early point where alternative family members

are identified as carers for the child with a duty on the Local Authority to undertake viability assessments.

Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) – an agency providing adoption services with and on behalf of multiple Local Authorities within a geographic region across the country.

Significant people in the child's life – may be extended relatives, neighbours and friends, connected to the child.

Stage One (checks and references) – includes registration and checks (including criminal records, health and address checks and references) preparation and training courses, where you can get to know other prospective adoptive families.

Stage Two – includes the full assessment, completed with the help of the prospective adopter's social worker. The prospective adopter report (PAR)/ adopter assessment report (AAR) is what the adoption panel will use to assess you.

Staying in touch plans – maintaining relationships and contact with the child's birth parents/families.

Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) – a registered independent agency providing adoption services and working in partnership with local authorities and regional adoption agencies.

Wider family – other members of the child's biological family such as brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins.



