



Adoption
England

regional adoption agencies working together

National Practice Standards for Matching





Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
Key purpose	5
Relevant statutory regulations and guidance	6
Implementation and governance	6
National Practice Standards for Matching	7
Standard 1 Principles underpinning effective matching for children where adoption is the plan.	8
Standard 2 Effective early care planning, tracking and family finding is in place to secure the best outcomes for children.	9
Standard 3 All professionals, including practitioners, managers and leaders, across organisations recognise the importance of engaging family members and the child in matching activity.	10
Standard 4 Matching considerations	12
Standard 5 Suitable prospective adopters are available to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption.	14
Standard 6 Maintaining significant relationships to support the identity needs for children.	15
Standard 7 Adoption support for children and families impacted by adoption.	16
Glossary of Terms as used in the Standards	17

Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the National Matching Practice Standards, designed as part of our programme of work to strengthen care planning and matching practices across England. The work aims to help children move in with their adoptive families in a timely way. Creating a new family for children who have experienced loss and trauma is one of the most significant responsibilities that professionals can undertake. The feelings and perspectives of all those involved, both personally and professionally, comes with a mix of expectation, hope, uncertainty, fear, and anxiety so paying attention to these are important considerations. The need to take a long-term view whilst also progressing a timely match is not always easy. Matching is a process, not an event, and requires an openness of mind, flexibility, and a relational approach.

These Matching Practice Standards have been co-produced with children's services professionals involved in matching from across the sector in England, as well as experts by experience. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the

practitioners involved in the development of these standards. It's clear those involved have been highly committed, creative and engaged, all wanting to achieve the very best for the children and families they work with.

What has become clear in the process of this work is that agencies do things in very different ways, depending upon local practice and organisational structures. Yet the drive and commitment to achieve the very best possible outcomes for children is consistent, ambitious, and inspiring, which is essential when delivering a child focused service. I would like to extend my gratitude to those with lived experience who have given their time to this work. Your contribution has been invaluable and is hugely appreciated.

Our key aim is to support and enable children's services professionals across local authorities and regional and voluntary adoption agencies to work collaboratively to reduce disparity in practice, provide agencies with a consistent approach, and set the level of expectations when matching a child with a new family. We hope that these standards can be used as a tool for progressing towards consistency to achieve the best possible outcomes for children.

Sarah Johal

National Adoption Strategic Lead



Introduction

The National Matching Practice Standards have been developed to reduce the disparity in matching practice nationally between Local Authorities (LAs) and adoption agencies. They provide a minimum set of expectations around the core service delivery requirements to consider when placing a child with an adoptive family and encourage a consistent approach.

Adoption planning for a child starts well before a Placement Order (PO) is granted or consent to placing for adoption is obtained. If adoption is one of the options being considered for the child, early priority should be given to proactive engagement between the child's local authority and the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), with matching viewed as a process rather than a single event.

Matching a child with an adoptive family is a complex and highly skilled task for the professionals involved. It is a life changing decision for many people, most importantly for the child, the birth family,

and the prospective adopters. Effective matching depends on careful decision making and a high level of accurate information sharing between professionals and prospective adopters. A consistent approach to adoption processes is a prerequisite for successful matching.

These standards have been developed by the Adoption England Matching Practice and Development Group, which consists of representatives from regional adoption agencies, Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) and local authorities. Consultations have been sought from experts by experience groups (adopted persons, adoptive parents, and birth parents reference groups), as well as the Consortium for Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS). Additionally, considerations have been given to the information contained within the Adoption Barometer Report 2021 (Adoption UK) and the Big Consult 2023 (PAC-UK). CoramBAAF have also contributed to this work and commented on the standards.



Key purpose

The purpose is to promote and shape effective matching practice protocols across LAs, RAAs and VAAs to:



Achieve child-centred practice in matching.



Enable every child to have every possible opportunity for matching.



Help standardise practice guidance and outcomes in delivery across agencies.



Promote confidence and best practice.



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 Act 2002 (as amended by Children and Families Act 2014)

Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005

Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005

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

Family Procedure Rules 2010

The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 2 care planning placement and case review

Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2013

Working Together 2023

Implementation and governance

The matching 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 matching practice should be developed 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 Practice Standards for Matching



Standard 1

Principles underpinning effective matching for children where adoption is the plan.

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's welfare throughout their life will be central to the matching process and decision making at all times.
- 1.2 All staff work and adhere to the timescales and processes set out in regulations and guidance.
- 1.3 Agencies promote an affirming, inclusive culture that encourages openness and acceptance of diversity.
- 1.4 All LA/RAA/VAA 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 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 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 (LAs, RAAs, VAAs, CAFCASS, Courts, and IROs) 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

Effective early care planning, tracking and family finding is in place to secure the best outcomes for children.

S2. **All professionals including family finding practitioners, social workers, managers, and leaders across all organisations work together. Ensuring effective delivery of care planning, family finding and linking and matching, from as early as possible, to avoid any delays in the child being able to join their permanent family.**

- 2.1 LAs and RAAs establish rigorous tracking processes from the early stages of public law proceedings for all children to minimise delays. All staff have knowledge of permanency planning. Staff can implement and access effective tracking/monitoring systems that allow scrutiny of individual family finding activity and its progress for each child.
- 2.2 LAs and RAAs work in partnership, communicate effectively, and have clear planning mechanisms and information sharing procedures for the early identification of children who may benefit from early permanence.
- 2.4 LAs and RAAs involve and draw on the knowledge of people closest to the child, including family, carers, and foster carers. Staff aim to gain a full picture of the child's early life experiences, support, and cultural needs, ensuring such information is shared with prospective adopters to assist with matching.
- 2.5 When considering the care options for a child in the care planning process (including twin tracking, early permanence, and adoption), clear pathways exist for making referrals to the adoption service as early as possible.
- 2.6 When it is known that adoption is a possible outcome, family finding processes are initiated promptly to avoid delay. Where appropriate, any necessary permission to disclose information is sought early on in proceedings from the court.
- 2.7 LAs and RAAs recognise that Black, Asian and minoritised children, brothers and sisters, children with additional needs, and of different ages are impacted the most by insufficiency of prospective adopters. Accordingly, proactive recruitment strategies are implemented to ensure these children are given the opportunity to be matched without delay.
- 2.8 LAs and RAAs ensure care planning processes are carried out in a timely manner, including conducting permanency planning meetings, completion of the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) and adoption health assessments. Family finding plans are in place for each child where there is a plan of adoption.

Standard 3

All professionals, including practitioners, managers and leaders, across organisations recognise the importance of engaging family members and the child in matching activity.

S3. **When adoption is being considered as a means of achieving permanence, adoption services are provided to children and their parents/guardians to ensure that they are actively supported to engage with the plan of adoption.**

Birth family involvement

- 3.1 Independent support is offered to birth parents, in line with the regulations, and is trauma-informed, respectful and empathetic. Acknowledgement is given to the lifelong impact of adoption. The support offer to birth parents is regularly revisited and continues for as long as needed.
- 3.2 Birth parents/wider family are treated fairly, honestly, with respect and without prejudice. Those with parental responsibility are kept informed of the progress (or lack of progress) of their child's adoption plan.
- 3.3 The wishes and feelings of the birth family and other people important to the child are listened to, valued and respected and taken into consideration when making decisions. Where they are not acted upon, the reasons for not doing so are explained and recorded on their child's case record and in the Child Permanence Report (CPR).
- 3.4 Birth parents/wider family are supported to share information about themselves and their child in whatever ways they prefer to. Thus, enabling informed plans to be made for the child now and in the future. Plans support the child's identity development, helping satisfy their need for information throughout their life.
- 3.5 Birth parents/wider family are supported to play an active part in the development of life story materials for their child. They're encouraged to write a narrative of their own, including their memories of the child. This work also gives birth parents/wider family an opportunity to express their wishes for their child's future.
- 3.6 Throughout the family finding process, birth parents/wider family are given every opportunity to contribute. Staff listen to their wishes and feelings in relation to the identification of the most suitable future adoptive family for their child.
- 3.7 Birth parents/wider family are given the opportunity to comment on written information about them or their circumstances, before the information is passed to the prospective adopters and adoption panel.
- 3.8 The relevant sections of the CPR are shared with the birth parents, and they are actively supported to contribute to this document.



Standard 4

Matching considerations

S4. Making a good match between a child and prospective adopter is a highly skilled task and it is vital for both the child and the prospective adopter that informed and careful consideration is given to the matching activity.

Consideration of child's needs

- 4.1 Each child requires an individual family finding plan, which sets out the steps to be taken to find a prospective adoptive family for them and includes clear timescales for review.
- 4.2 All information relating to the child, such as the CPR is accurate and regularly updated to ensure an understanding of the child's current and future needs.
- 4.3 The race, culture, religion and language of the child is considered in relation to their need to belong and for their ongoing identity development when selecting a prospective adoptive family. The child's birth family is recognised as the most important source of information about their cultural and racial identity. The child's birth first name should be retained in all but exceptional circumstances.
- 4.4 Up-to-date information detailing the immediate health and development needs of the child is considered when selecting a prospective adoptive family. This includes considering any potential future needs and any support required. Prospective adopters are provided with all the information relating to the child's health and development to enable informed decisions to be made.

Matching activity

- 4.5 The professional who knows the child best is actively involved in the planning of matching. This is usually the child's social worker.
- 4.6 A high-quality, dynamic profile of the child is created using digital technology/mediums to ensure that the child's personality is fully captured. This is regularly updated to reflect the child's changing development and needs.
- 4.8 All prospective adopters within the RAA, (those in assessment and those approved and waiting), are considered to avoid delay. If from the outset, it appears unlikely that an approved family within the RAA could meet the child's needs, then an agreement to seek an interagency placement is sought early on.
- 4.9 All digital and non-digital matching resources locally and nationally are used proactively and creatively to avoid drift and delay for children and prospective adopters. Family finding must not be influenced by a lack of in-house provision.
- 4.10 LAs/RAAs/VAs are committed to placing children with adoptive families which reflect their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, and language, as closely as possible. If this can be achieved within the child's timescales.

3.9 Wherever possible the birth parents/wider family will be supported to meet with their child's prospective adoptive parents. Situations where this does not happen will be the exception.

3.10 The birth parents/wider family are recognised as the best source of information about their child's cultural and racial identity and are supported to share this information to inform matching.

Voice of the child and preparation

3.11 The child is given information about their care plan and is supported to understand it with age-appropriate direct work and resources.

3.12 Life story work and preparation for adoption is undertaken with the child as early as possible. It is continued throughout the child's journey through adoption, with consideration given to involving specialist/therapeutic life story workers as needed.

3.13 The child's views, wishes and feelings must be ascertained, with consideration given to the best method and timescales for carrying out this work. The age and development of the child is taken into consideration throughout.

3.14 The child is given age-appropriate information about the prospective adopters, their home, any existing children and pets before they are placed with them.

3.15 When a plan of adoption has been decided, direct adoption preparation work with the child starts as early as possible in preparation for the transition to a prospective adoptive family. Consideration should be given to the use of sensory measures when preparing very young children and babies.



Standard 5

Suitable prospective adopters are available to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption.

- S5. Prospective adopter(s) are recruited from diverse communities and are well prepared and supported to meet the different needs of children with a plan for adoption.**
- 5.1 The RAA/VAA takes responsibility for ensuring local sufficiency of suitable prospective adopters to meet the needs of all children likely to require adoptive families.
- 5.2 All professionals in the RAA/VAA have a clear understanding of the needs of children who are likely to require adoption. They are proactive and ambitious for those children, including organising specific recruitment campaigns.
- 5.3 Prospective adopters are supported to think about all children, including those outside their initial preference. Prospective adopters are supported to consider a broad range of children, such as those with additional needs and sibling groups. They are encouraged and supported to maintain that consideration.
- 5.4 Robust preparation and training sessions are provided to prospective adopters to ensure realistic expectations and an understanding of the differing needs of children waiting. Training is delivered by adoption professionals, including experienced adoptive parents and early permanence carers, as well as the voice of birth parents and adopted people.
- 5.5 Prospective adopters are supported to undertake self-led linking through various family finding activities.
- 5.6 The RAA/VAA ensures matching plan agreements are completed and reviewed regularly with prospective adopters to ensure there is a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved.
- 5.7 When a potential match is being considered, the placing agency will provide the prospective adopter's social worker access to the entire contents of the child's case record. This ensures they are fully aware of the child's background, health, emotional and developmental needs, as well as the practical implications for parenting that child.
- 5.8 The adoption agency and child's social worker meet with the prospective adopters to discuss the proposed placement. They discuss the implications for them and their family and ascertain their views. As far as possible, prospective adopters are provided with all information and access to specialist medical/educational advice.
- 5.9 Prospective 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.
- 5.10 Adoption support plans provide clear and detailed information to prospective adopters. They include information on the child and the birth family's current and anticipated support needs, as well as those of the prospective adopter's family members (including existing children) and how these will be met in the future. All plans specify ongoing arrangements for review.

- 4.11 Matches are child-centred and consider all the child's needs. Any restrictions placed on a potential match, e.g. geographical considerations, one or two parent families or other factors, are evidence-based.
- 4.12 Practitioners actively demonstrate commitment to keep brothers and sisters together, unless this does not meet their individually evidenced and assessed needs. In which case consideration will need to be given as to how significant relationships will be maintained, if separated.
- 4.13 When considering families for children, practitioners make use of the tools and resources available to fully understand the child's needs and the capacity of prospective adopters to meet those needs.
- 4.14 Prospective adopters are kept informed of the progress of their enquiries/expression of interest in a child. All RAAs/VAA's to clearly set out timescales for responses to enquires/expressions of interest made.
- 4.15 An adoption support plan is available for family finding and revisited as part of the matching process. This is to be assessed alongside the needs/and or strengths of the prospective adoptive family identified.
- 4.16 Linking/selection/matching meetings are organised as soon as a potential link is identified to agree it's progression. Within the meeting, consideration is given to reviewing the adoption support plan, identifying, and considering support and financial needs, including adoption allowances and the adoption panel is booked at the earliest opportunity.
- 4.17 When a link is agreed, consideration is given to prospective adopters meeting key professionals. This includes foster carers to gain a clear understanding of the child's needs.
- 4.18 The use of informal meetings (pre-meets/bump-ins) are considered to enable further assessment of the proposed match as part of the process.
- 4.19 Agencies ensure adoption panel membership is gender balanced and reflects the composition of the community served by the agency. Members are recruited from a range of diverse backgrounds and have the necessary knowledge and expertise to support the adoption service. This enables panels to make effective child-centred decisions about the match proposals before them.
- 4.20 Innovative methods to identify families for children waiting the longest are considered and implemented.
- 4.21 Child appreciation days take place for children being placed for adoption, when possible as part of celebrating the child's life but also sharing their life story with prospective adopters to provide a holistic overview of the child's early life and experiences.



Standard 6

Maintaining significant relationships to support the identity needs for children.

S6. **All involved ensure that the child is given every opportunity to stay in touch with those people who are important to them, to help them understand their history and support their identity development as they grow up.**

- 6.1 The value of maintaining relationships is acknowledged and given due recognition in the matching process. This includes the child's parents, siblings, and anyone else who is important to them, including grandparents, the wider family and friends.
- 6.2 Staying in touch (SiT) 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.
- 6.3 Arrangements for reviewing the child's staying in touch plans are clear, understood by all parties, and assessed. Professionals ensure that the proposed match and plan will meet the needs of the child throughout childhood and adolescence.
- 6.4 Adoption Support plans outline the support required for the staying in touch arrangements. This includes support for the child, prospective adopters, birth parents, brothers and sisters, children in the prospective adopters' family and anyone else identified in the plan.
- 6.5 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. Ensure that the child's specific needs can be met by the proposed match.
- 6.6 Later life letters from the birth family (in addition to the letter prepared by the social worker) to the adopted child are considered and timetabled (subject to the wishes and views of the child at the stage when the letter is to be sent).
- 6.7 Life story books are provided by the time the adoption order is made. They should include references to all those people who have been identified as important to the child.
- 6.8 Birth and adoptive parents are offered the opportunity to discuss their wishes and feelings about staying in touch and are supported to understand the staying in touch plans. They are also able to access additional support as required in the future. Wherever possible, birth family members and prospective adopters should be offered the opportunity to meet.
- 6.9 Birth parents are encouraged and enabled to discuss their wishes and feelings about the 'farewell for now/wish you well contact', and a plan developed to ensure that they are supported prior to, during and after this contact takes place.
- 6.10 Professionals involved with the child ensure an appropriate plan is made to enable the child to maintain connections/relationships with their foster family following the period of introductions to their prospective adoptive family.

Standard 7

Adoption support for children and families impacted by adoption.

S7. **All services recognise that adoption is an evolving life-long process for all those involved including adoptees, birth, and adoptive relatives.**

- 7.1 Every child with a plan of adoption must receive an assessment of support needs, which is to be reviewed regularly through the statutory review process. This plan is to be updated to consider the evolving needs of the child.
- 7.2 When matching a child to a family, whilst consideration is to be given to the needs of both the child and the prospective adoptive family, the child's needs are always paramount.
- 7.3 All prospective adopters will have an adoption support plan agreed before the match is presented to the adoption panel. These plans include details of identified and anticipated support needs. Comprehensive clarity regarding how this will be provided should be detailed, including staying in touch arrangements and any therapeutic and/or financial support packages that may be offered.
- 7.4 Prospective adopters are supported during recruitment, preparation and assessment to understand that the fundamental issues raised by adoption may reverberate and resurface at different times and stages throughout an individual's life. Information on how to access adoption support services including assessment of need are provided to all prospective adopters
- 7.5 Birth parents/ family/significant others are supported to decide what role they wish to play in the child's life at the time of matching and/or in the future. This applies whether they agree with the adoption plan or not. Information on how to access adoption support services must be provided in accordance with the regulations.



Glossary of terms as used in the standards

Adoption Panel makes 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 ongoing phases of their development.

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

CAFCASS – Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. Non-departmental public body.

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 new placement or other transition on all concerned.

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

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) is 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) is an umbrella term covering concurrency and fostering for adoption placements. Both retain the potential for a child to be reunified with 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.

Family finding plan – A plan of how the identification of a prospective adoptive family will be undertaken for the child, what steps will be taken.

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is 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 is an approach to helping children understand their journey from birth, through care and permanency.

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

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

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

Matching agreement outlines how the agency will seek to find the right child for the family.

Placement Order is 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.

Practitioners refers to 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.

Public Law Outline (PLO) is 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.

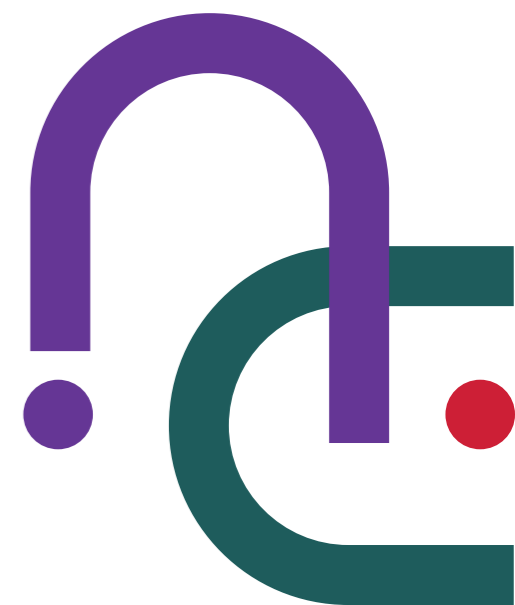
Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) is an agency providing adoption services with and on behalf of multiple local authorities within a geographic region across the country.

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

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

Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) is a registered independent agency providing adoption services and works 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.





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