

1. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

1.1 Legislative Framework

The Adoption Regulations 2005, the National Minimum Standards Adoption Services, the Adoption Act 1976 (as amended), the Inter County Adoption (Hague Convention) Regulations 2003 and The Adoption & Children Act 2002 provide the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000, for the conduct of Adoption services.

The framework is designed to increase accountability and define responsibility for all actions and practice undertaken within the service.

The National Care Standards Commission will undertake a three yearly inspection of the Adoption Services.

1.2 Aim

Staffordshire Social Services Department's primary aim is to provide services to children and families to promote the health, education and development of children in ways that meet the best interests of the child.

1.3 Values

The values underpinning all work undertaken by the Adoption Agency are:

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their needs during childhood and beyond.
- It is best for children where possible to be brought up by their own birth family.
- The child's welfare, safety and needs will be at the centre of the adoption process.
- The child's wishes and feelings will be actively sought and fully taken into account at all stages.
- Delays in adoption can have a severe impact on the health and development of children and should be avoided wherever possible.
- Children's ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, and language will be fully recognised and positively valued and promoted when decisions are made.
- The role of adoptive parents in offering a permanent family to a child who cannot live with their birth family will be valued and respected.

- Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved and requires lifelong commitment from many different organisations, professions, and individuals who have to work together to meet the needs for services of those affected by adoption. (Adoption Standards 2005)
- We will work in partnership with other statutory agencies including education and health and voluntary adoption agencies to ensure National Minimum Standards are delivered.

1.4 Aims and Objectives of the Local Authority in relation to the Adoption Service

The Adoption Service aims to provide services that are user friendly, welcoming and non-discriminatory based on consultation with all users.

The Adoption Service aims to provide a comprehensive adoption service to all those who require or request it. The service offered is based on statutory requirements, sound principles and a model of practice underpinned by comprehensive policy and procedure documents.

1.5 The Nature of the Work Undertaken by the Adoption Service

- To provide a permanent family by means of adoption, this will meet the needs of that child/children/young person for stability, security, love and be a resource into their adulthood and beyond.
- The recruitment, assessment, training, preparation and support of a wide range of prospective adoptive parents in order to meet the placement needs of babies and children and young people with specific needs. **We will prioritise the assessments of prospective adopters who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting.**
- Counselling pregnant women who wish to place their babies for adoption.
- Counselling and offering independent support to birth families who are not voluntarily relinquishing their children for adoption.
- Schedule 2 Counselling for Adopted Adults, sharing information from the adoption file, giving advice and support and acting as intermediary in contacting birth relatives where appropriate.
- Assessment, training, preparation and counselling of people who wish to adopt a child from abroad in line with regulations and standards.

- Providing a service and consultancy service to area colleagues who are working with a child and family where adoption is the plan.
- Undertaking assessments and preparing reports for the court in relation to in family adoption applications.
- Preparing reports for Adoption Panel and the Courts on all aspects of adoption work.
- Preparing reports and attending other Local Authority adoption panels and the courts on all aspects of adoption work.
- Preparing reports for and attending other Local Authority Adoption Panels when a match has been recommended for a Staffordshire approved family.
- Offering an adoption support service after placement and following Order being made.
- Utilising resources of the West Midlands Regional Family Placement Consortium.

1.6 Adoption and Permanence Policy

Staffordshire County Council's primary aim is to provide services for children and families which are in the best interests of children.

Staffordshire Adoption Agency believes that all children have the right to a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond. We recognise that permanence is important to give a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity.

1.7 The Primary Objectives of the Local Authority

- To support and maintain children with their birth family or with family or friends where this is consistent with the child's welfare.
- Where children are in care to Staffordshire County Council, to return them to the care of the birth family, relatives or friends as soon as is practicable, taking account of their welfare. Any rehabilitation plan will take account of the importance of time in a child's life.
- When remaining or returning to the birth parents or to wider family or friends is not in the child's best interests or is not achievable within the child's time scale, the Local Authority will strive to achieve permanence through other means.

1.8 The Options to be Considered

- Adoption
- Residence Order/ Special Guardianship Order
- Long term fostering
- Residential care or such other specialist placement consistent with the child's assessed needs.

In order to ensure the same standard of practice and accountability for children in care aged 12 years and under, all plans to place child/children with a permanent substitute family including **birth relatives** will be referred to the Panel constituted under the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005.

The planning process should identify which option is most likely to meet the life long needs of the individual child and will take account of their views and feelings by the second (four month) review.

1.9 Where Adoption is the Plan

Staffordshire County Council's adoption agency will adhere to the following principles and values.

Staffordshire Adoption Agency is committed:

- To placing children with adoptive/permanent families which reflects their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language. However, a time limit for achieving this will be agreed by adoption panel dependent on the child's timescales. Twin track family finding will begin if it seems unlikely that this can be achieved. Assessment of adopters and adoption support plans will consider the particular requirements of a trans-cultural placement.
- To placing brothers/sisters together unless this does not meet their individually assessed needs.
- To ensuring the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child in care are at the centre of the adoption process.
- To treating people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process.
- To matching children with approved adopters who can offer them a stable and permanent home. Help and support will be provided to achieve a successful and lasting placement.
- To acknowledging the life long implications of adoption for birth relatives. They will be treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process.

1.10 Adoption Services Provided to the Child

- An allocated Social Worker to counsel, inform and prepare the child for placement and to offer support following placement.
- Provision of the Children's Guide to Adoption in the format most appropriate to that child.
- Independent advocacy via Children's Advice and Representation Service, Children's Voice Officer and Young People's Forum.
- A commitment to keeping brothers and sisters together unless this does not meet their individually assessed needs.
- A commitment to place children with adoptive/permanent families which reflect their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language within the child's time-scale.
- Assessment of adoptive support needs prior to identifying a family.

1.11 Adoption Services Provided to the Birth Families

- An independent counsellor/support worker to ensure discussion of the life long implications of adoption, to ensure their views about adoption and contact are represented and have the opportunity to comment on what is written about them or their circumstances prior to presentation to Adoption Panel. This worker will also keep them informed following Panel with a view to ensuring continuity via information/memories of the child's life prior to adoption and written contact agreements where appropriate.
- A "Post-Box" system for indirect contact between birth families and adoptive families via letters and photographs.
- Support in "direct" contact with adoptive families.

1.12 Adoption Services Provided to the Prospective and Approved Adopters

- A prompt, sensitive and effective response to enquiries by Social workers based in the Recruitment/Training Team (Stafford).
- Preparation groups planned a year in advance to enable participation.
- Timely allocation of applications prioritising any applicants who may be able to meet the needs of children awaiting placement or where adoption is the plan.
- Timely and sensitive assessments.

1.13 Adoption Services Provided to the Adoptive Parents Support

- Assessment of Adoption Support needs prior to consideration of a placement by the Adoption Panel.
- Access to advice and assistance via the Adoption Support Service.
- Access to peer support via development of Adoption Support Groups.
- Consultation on development of Adoption Support Services.

1.14 Organisational Structure

The recruitment and training team is based in Stafford and the adoption team is based in Uttoxeter. Both of these teams offer a County wide service although staff covering the East of the county are based in Lichfield.

Stafford Team

The Stafford team is responsible for the recruitment and training of foster carers and adoptive carers. The team has a recruitment strategy for both fostering and adoption.

This team runs an enquiry line with a free phone number. The line is staffed by experienced Social Workers during office hours with an answer phone at other times. The team also manages the family placement page on Staffordshire's web site and has developed an interactive site.

There is a recruitment bus which can promote the work of the service across the county. The team undertakes initial visits to prospective adopters and run regular preparation groups. Although most applicants are supported in these initial stages by the Stafford team, some applicants are prioritised and referred to the other family placement teams as appropriate, for example those offering a specialist resource.

There is close liaison between the recruitment team and other family placement teams to ensure there is a clear picture of the needs of local children.

Stafford co-ordinate publicity and advertising campaigns including specific advertising.

Adopters are welcome to attend the additional training provided to foster carers but we are also developing post approval training specifically for adopters.

The Recruitment and Training Team based at Stafford have a full time Manager, 2 Senior Practitioners, 3 social workers and 2 full time equivalent Family Support worker posts.

Adoption Team.

The Adoption Team are responsible for assessment and individual support of adoptive parents/families before and after placement, including the preparation of reports and statements for panel and court. The teams respond to requests for support from adoptive families, which can be many years after the Adoption Order has been made. The teams also manage access to records when requested.

The aim of the team is to find families for children who cannot live with their own families, with most of their work focused on children who have traditionally proved hard to place. The team undertakes assessments of those applicants seen as most likely to provide a resource to the children who wait.

The teams operate systems to search for appropriate placements for children, which may include the placing of adverts and articles in professional papers. They also chair matching meetings, life appreciation days and pre-placement planning meetings. The team "Family Find" for individual children and help promote the needs of children who are likely to need adoptive families.

The Adoption team provide Schedule 2 Counselling for Adopted Adults. The teams also offer independent counselling for birth relatives and adopted young people.

The team have input into training for foster carers on adoption issues and are part of a multi-agency attachment group/forum.

Help and advice is offered to the general public on adoption matters through the office cover system. Colleagues in the area social work teams and other agencies can also access support through this system.

We have a regular advertisement in Adoption Today featuring individual children and promoting the work of the team. We run "Children Who Wait" meetings for approved adopters and those in the later stages of assessment.

Adoption Support systems are being developed including support groups and post approval training.

The team participates in community events particularly where these provide an opportunity to promote adoption to ethnic minority communities.

One worker in the team is a member of adoption panel.

Several of the families recruited by The Adoption Team have provided a resource for children from other authorities.

The Adoption Team has a full time Manager, 4 senior practitioners, and 5 social workers (4 full time equivalents).

Adoption Support is currently being provided through After Adoption who are contracted to provide services following the statutory 3 year post Adoption Order time frame.

Permanency Teams

There are 4 Permanency Teams based in Newcastle under Lyme, Tamworth, Lichfield and Cannock. Each team is managed by a full time Manager. The Manager chairs the Permanency Planning meetings.

The primary task of the service is to eliminate case drift for children in care aged 12 and under. Where the goal is permanence, (either adoption or long term fostering), their planning and decision-making is actively managed and progressed in accordance with new timescales as identified in the new adoption standards which came into force in April 2003.

The Permanency Team will also become involved where there is twin tracked planning and the plan for the child is either a return to birth parents or permanency via fostering or adoption.