

**Swindon Borough Council
Children Services**



Children, Families & Community Health Services
Civic Offices, Euclid Street, Swindon SN1 2JH

ADOPTION SERVICE

Statement of Purpose

April 2017

SWINDON BOROUGH COUNCIL
Adoption Service
Statement of Purpose

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SWINDON BOROUGH COUNCIL ADOPTION SERVICE

Legal Context

The functions of Swindon Borough Council – ‘The Local Authority’ – as an approved adoption agency are governed by the provisions of ***the Adoption and Children Act 2002*** and accompanying Regulations and Guidance. This legislation came fully into effect on 30th December 2005, with updated regulation and statutory guidance on Adoption issued in February 2011 and July 2013 which includes the responsibilities of Adoption Support Agency in relation to adoption support to adoptive and birth families.

This Statement of Purpose has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of *The Adoption Agency’s Service (England) Regulations 2011*, and fulfils the Agencies duties and responsibilities as set out in Standard 18 of the accompanying Adoption National Minimum Standards, published under the provisions of Sections 23(1) and 49(1) of the Care Standards Act 2000. The Statement further seeks to reflect the Council’s commitment to ‘Best Practice’ in Adoption work.

In addition this Statement of Purpose aims to meet the requirements and expectations of:

- **The Care Standards Act 2000**
- **The Adoption and Children Act 2002 and associated Regulations and Guidance**
- **Adoption and Children Act Guidance 2011**
- **The Children Act 1989**
- **The National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014**
- **DfE Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2014**

This Statement is informed by, and builds on, the Agency’s adoption procedures and policy statements developed in line with the 2002 legislation and subsequent guidance. This statement will be reviewed annually by the Adoption Service’s registered manager as per Regulation 2 and Standard 18.3 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards.

This Statement of Purpose is readily available to a range of people including:

- Children/young people, their families and carers who use our service
- Prospective and approved adoptive families
- Staff who work for Swindon Borough Council
- Other interested parties, e.g. volunteers and independent workers
- Local authorities and other organisations who use or are considering using our services
- Adoption panel members
- Members of the public

Aims and Objectives

Swindon Borough Council, in its work with children and their families, seeks to ensure that all children grow up as part of a loving family that can meet their needs for security, stability and quality care throughout childhood and into adulthood. Where children are unable to live within their own birth family or extended social network, a range of services and resources will be provided, designed in the first instance to assist families in resuming the care of their children and if not an alternative placement provision will be identified (this includes finding permanent alternative families through permanent fostering or adoption). The Council aims through its Adoption Service to find permanent alternative families who will promote the child's well-being and development by providing the highest possible standards of care according to his or her individual assessed needs.

The specific objectives of the Adoption Service are:

- To ensure that adoption is considered as an option for all children requiring permanent alternative care away from their own birth family
- To ensure that the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process
- To ensure that decision-making in respect of permanence plans for children takes place within prescribed time-scales where this is consistent with the needs and interests of the child
- To recruit and maintain sufficient numbers and diversity of prospective and approved adopters to meet most of the assessed needs of Swindon children, including such factors as ethnicity, culture, religion and language
- To provide an efficient and effective service to prospective adopters, including those interested in Inter-Country Adoption
- Where compatible with the above objectives, to increase the number of children adopted from the care system, in line with government targets.
- To develop and deliver a range of adoption support services to adopters, adopted children, and their birth families, in accordance with legislation, regulations and guidance
- To ensure that staff involved in adoption work have the necessary qualifications, knowledge, skills, and training to deliver an effective service

Principles and Values

The work of Swindon Council's Adoption Service is underpinned by the following values and beliefs:

A) Children:

- ❖ Every child is entitled to a permanent family throughout their childhood, which should meet all their needs in terms of stability and security, that promotes their physical, social and emotional development, and that offers a supportive lifelong relationship

- ❖ Where those needs cannot be met within a child's own birth family or extended social network, adoption may offer the best alternative for meeting those needs
- ❖ In all planning for children, the child's welfare is the paramount consideration
- ❖ A child's own wishes and feelings should always be sought and taken into account in decision-making, according to the child's age and understanding
- ❖ Children are entitled to be treated with respect; diversity and difference should be valued and enjoyed
- ❖ A child's sense of identity and self-respect needs to be actively promoted through particular awareness of issues of ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, ability/disability and sexual orientation
- ❖ Children should only be separated from their siblings where clear evidence supports doing so on the basis of the children's individual assessed needs
- ❖ Every child is entitled to information about his/her birth family in order to promote his/her sense of identity
- ❖ On-going contact with birth relatives or significant persons should be encouraged if compatible with the child's need for physical safety and emotional security

B) Adopters:

- ❖ The role of adoptive parents in offering a permanent family to a child will be valued and respected
- ❖ All adoptive applicants will be treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process. No applicant will be discriminated against on grounds of ethnicity, culture, language, sexuality, gender, financial status or marital status
- ❖ All applicants are entitled to know what issues will be taken into account in their assessment, including age, health, relationships, and family history. Applicants will be regarded as partners in the assessment process, and will be kept fully informed of their progress, and of any concerns identified in the assessment and be given regular opportunities to raise specific concerns or questions which are then answered as directly and fully as possible
- ❖ The Adoption Service is primarily concerned with finding suitable families for children, not meeting the needs of prospective adopters. All enquiries and applications for adoption will be prioritised for allocation according to the current needs of children awaiting adoptive homes

C) Birth Families

- ❖ The SBC adoption agency is active in its efforts to involve the birth parents and birth family in the adoption plan.
- ❖ The Swindon Borough Council's Services will work in partnership with birth parents and other family members to

ensure that effective plans are made and implemented for the child wherever possible

- ❖ Birth families will be treated fairly, openly and with respect, and their relationship with their child will be acknowledged
- ❖ Birth families will be kept fully informed of the adoption process, the legal implications, and their rights and given opportunity to comment on what is written about them
- ❖ Birth families will be given such information about their child's adoptive parents as is compatible with the child's, and the adoptive family's, safety and security
- ❖ Birth families will be given access to and regularly encouraged to use the independent professional social work help and advice, including counselling services, if required
- ❖ The wishes and feelings of birth parents, siblings and other members of the birth family, and other people the agency considers relevant, are listened to and are valued and respected.

D) General

- ❖ Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved. The Adoption Agency will engage with other organisations, professionals and individuals to ensure that support services are available as needed to all parties in the adoption process - children, adopters, and birth families
- ❖ All parties to the adoption process will have access to the Agency's own complaints procedures and to external complaints mechanisms as set out in legislation and regulations

Agency Management, Staffing and Organisational Structure.

A. Management of the Service

Arrangements for the management of the Adoption Service are delegated by the Director of Children Services to the Head of Children, Families & Community Health who is also the "Agency Decision-Maker". Responsibility for the operational management and strategic direction of the Adoption Service as a whole is exercised through a service manager, the post-holder being directly accountable to the Head of Children, Families & Community Health. This service manager line manages the Team Manager of the Fostering & Adoption Team, responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training and support of adopters (and foster carers), and for identifying potential matches between prospective adopters and children for whom a decision has been made that they should be placed for Adoption. The selection of suitable 'matches' to be presented to the Adoption Panel for consideration is the joint responsibility of the relevant Social Work Team and Fostering & Adoption Service.

The appointed manager of Swindon Fostering and Adoption service is

Name: Matt Dauncey

Date of Appointment: March 2016

Qualifications:

DipSw 2001 Trowbridge College

PQ1 Birmingham University

BA(Hons) Philosophy & History – Brighton Polytechnic 1991

Practice Teacher, Educator and Assessors Award – Open University 2012

Therapeutic Group Work Practice Award – Birmingham 2005

Certified Drama Therapy Practitioner – Somerset 2001

Relevant Experience

Wiltshire Council - Adoption Panel Member 2014 - 2016

Wiltshire Council – Fostering Service Manager 2014 – 2016

Wiltshire Council – Assistant Team Manager Fostering Service 2014

Wiltshire Council – Supervising Social Worker 2013 – 2014

Somerset County Council – Assessing Social Worker, Fostering Team 2011 – 2013

Somerset County Council – Specialist Social Worker 2012 – 2013

Somerset County Council – Child Protection Social Worker – 2007 – 2011

NSPCC – Therapeutic Social Worker 2003 – 2007

NCH – Community Social Worker 2001 - 2003

B. Organisational Structure

Social Work Teams

Every looked-after child in Swindon has an allocated qualified social worker, who is responsible through established management and supervisory arrangements for co-ordinating multiagency care plan, including permanence

planning for those children who have been assessed as unable to return to the care of their own birth families. This implementation is ratified and monitored through the Looked After Children review arrangements by Independent Reviewing Officer.

These social workers will be based in one of four Social Work Teams. There is a separate Disabled Children's Team working from a separate office base, with children for some of whom the care plan may be adoption. Workers in all of these teams are responsible for supporting birth relatives in accessing the independent support services that have been commissioned in accordance with regulations.

Social workers involved in adoption work are professionally qualified, and all have access to regular supervision from qualified and experienced Team Managers and/or Assistant Team Managers.

Fostering & Adoption Team

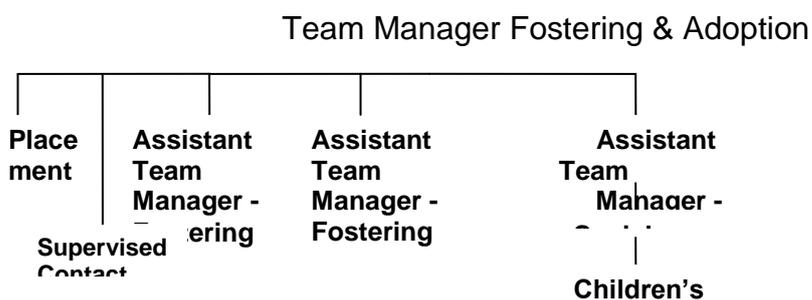
The assessment, training and support of adopters and prospective adopters is undertaken by the Adoption Section within the Fostering & Adoption Team. Recruitment activity and some training is shared jointly with the Fostering Service workers.

The Adoption Section also has primary responsibility for:

- 'Family finding' for those children for whom adoption is the plan,
- Involving the matching of the child's needs (as assessed by the child's social worker) with the skills, abilities – and preferences – of the Agency's approved adopters
- Information relating to adoption for the general public
- Recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters. The Service is also responsible for the assessment of foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care
- The Adoption Service also has responsibility for inter-country adoption. Anyone wishing to adopt a child from overseas must first be approved as suitable by Swindon Borough Council. This process involves a fee and the issuing of a Certificate of Eligibility from the Department for Education before the application to the Overseas Country can proceed
- Adoption support to all parties involved in adoption including adopters, children, adoptees and birth families
- Assisting with the preparation and review of Special Guardianship support plans
- Support to maintain contact where appropriate and agreed between adopted children and their birth relatives

- Intermediary services support with tracing and reunification and additional support services can be accessed via the current Service Level Agreement with After Adoption
- Where a suitable local match cannot be identified, the section will initiate a wider search, utilising regional and national resources such as the South West Adoption Consortium (of which Swindon Borough Council is a subscribing member), the National Adoption Register, the CoramBAAF 'Be My Parent' publication, the Adoption UK 'Children who Wait' publication and other avenues as necessary. It is envisaged that with the regionalisation of adoption services further resources will be developed and commissioned within the Adopt Thames Valley region later in 2017.
- The Adoption Section also carries responsibility for the management of the agency's 'letterbox' service, providing for the exchange of written information between adopted families and their birth families
- The Section also delivers at no charge the agency's statutory responsibilities for providing counselling and assistance to adopted adults seeking information about, and access to, their birth records (*Schedule 2, Adoption & Children Act 2002*) Adoption agencies can additionally, if they choose, provide intermediary services to support adopted people and their relatives to make contact with each other
- Swindon Borough Council has elected **not** to register as a provider of Intermediary Services. However these services are available from local adoption support services agencies

C. Staffing: The Adoption Section forms one discrete part of the Fostering & Adoption Team whose composition is as follows:



The team is structured in such a way as to ensure that staff caseloads reflect individual skills and experience. When necessary, experienced and suitably qualified staff are deployed to meet any identified shortfall in

Qualifications and Experience

All operational staff hold the minimum qualification of CQSW / DipSW and need to be registered with HCPC.

Post qualifying training is regularly assessed and reviewed as part of regular supervision and annual appraisals.

The team has traditionally low staff turnover; the team therefore operates from a very high skills and experience base. The team manager and assistant team manager (adoption) have between them extensive knowledge and experience in child care social work.

The Adoption Panel

Swindon Borough Council has its own independently-chaired Adoption Panel, constituted in accordance with current regulations. Panel membership is drawn from a central list of suitably-qualified individuals, but with a 'core' composition as attached at Appendix 1. The chief functions of the panel in relation to children and families as per Regulation 18, 26 and 32 are:

- *To recommend whether or not a prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child*
(it may also consider and give advice about the number /age-range/sex/ likely needs and background of children the prospective adopter may be suitable to adopt)
- *To recommend whether a child should be placed for adoption with a particular prospective adopter*
- *Relinquished children or consent given – recommendation adoption is the plan*

Note: Changes in legislation in September 2012 removed from Adoption Panels their role in making recommendations about whether children should be placed for adoption, except in the case children who have been voluntarily relinquished by their birth parents.

The panel must also consider, and may give advice to the agency about:

- *The authority's proposal for the provision of adoption support services for the adoptive family*
- *The arrangements the agency proposes to make for allowing any person contact with the child*
- *Whether the parental responsibility of any parent or guardian, or the prospective adopter, should be restricted, and to what extent*

The panel will make its recommendations based on detailed written reports prepared by the child's social worker and / or adopter's social worker, who will also attend the meeting in person. In considering the approval of prospective adopters, and when considering a proposed match with a

particular child, the applicants are also invited to attend the panel meeting in person.

The Panel's recommendations are referred to the *Agency Decision Maker* for a final decision; in Swindon this role is held by the Head of Children, Families & Community Health.

The panel receives regular feedback on children for whom placement for adoption has been agreed but are still awaiting placement. It also receives annual update reports on approved adopters still awaiting a placement.

Monitoring and Evaluation of the Service Provision

Work with Children and their Families:

All social workers with case-holding responsibility for looked-after children hold a professional qualification. There are established agency policies and procedures providing for regular supervision and annual appraisal of staff. Practice guidance and tools have been developed for regular auditing of case files by Team Managers and Service Managers. Feedback from audits is provided quarterly to Quality Performance Board.

All case planning concerning looked after children requires the involvement of the Team Manager or Assistant Team Manager; plans for achieving permanence, including adoption, are made in accordance with regulatory requirements and guidance.

Children for whom adoption is the plan remain children in care until such time as the Adoption Order is made, and prior to placement for adoption remain subject to statutory review at the prescribed intervals set out in the *Reg 36.1 CPPR 2010*. Following placement with the adoptive family, but prior to the making of an adoption order, reviews will be held in accordance with the requirements of the Adoption Agency Regulations 2011, regulation 36.2 and 36.3. Reviews are chaired by Independent Reviewing Officers managed within the Department's Reviewing and Quality Assurance Service.

Work with prospective and approved Adopters

All social workers undertaking assessments and writing the report of prospective adopters are professionally qualified and must either have the qualifications and experience as required by the Adoption Reports Regulations (ARR) or be supervised by a person with the qualifications and experience as required by the ARR, see chapter 1.

Reports, such as the child's permanence report and the prospective adopter's report are essential to the fundamental decisions that are made at key points during the adoption process. Such adoption reports should be objective and prepared only by individuals who either have the necessary qualifications and experience or are supervised by a person who has. Because of the

importance of these reports, section 94 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (the Act) prohibits the writing or commissioning of reports by someone who does not meet the requirements set out in the Restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 (ARR).

There are established agency policies and procedures providing for regular supervision and annual appraisal of staff. Case files are maintained with clear guidance issued as to structure and organisation, and practice guidance and tools have been developed for regular auditing by managers.

Preparation Courses which form part of the assessment of prospective adopters are co-led by Adoption Social Workers and an experienced adopter, who will contribute to the assessment report, thus providing an additional objective perspective to the report. All assessments are undertaken in accordance with practice guidance on Undertaking and Adoption Assessment which was published by BAAF in 2013. All reports to be presented to the Adoption Panel are scrutinised by Team Manager / Assistant Team Managers for quality control purposes.

The Adoption Panel provides an additional 'quality control' function in relation to all aspects of the Adoption Service, by offering commentary on reports submitted. Comments are fed back to the Agency Decision-Maker, who reads all relevant panel paperwork.

An annual report is prepared for the council by the Independent Panel Chair; this provides a summary of any issues raised relating to agency practice. Six-monthly reports on the Adoption Service are presented to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Board by the Manager of the Fostering & Adoption Team.

Training programmes for all staff involved in adoption work – including panel members – are developed in conjunction with the Council's Learning and Development Team and form part of the core 'pathway training' for both new and experienced staff. The panel chair contributes to such training. All relevant operational staff have received training on the updated adoption legislation, regulations and guidance.

The Local Authority Children's service is subject to regular inspection by the The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

In November 2013 Ofsted began its current single inspection programme: this looks at all local authority social care services in one inspection. The last such Single Agency Inspection took place in March 2014, and rated where adoption performance was judged as 'good'.

Adoption Support Services

The Adoption Service has appointed an Adoption Support Services Advisor in accordance with the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 (Reg.6). The role is currently held by Assistant Team Manager (Adoption) in the Fostering & Adoption Team.

The Adoption Service is committed to ensuring that appropriate support is offered to all parties - the child, his/her birth family, and the adopters – at all stages of the adoption process before, during and after adoption, for as long as is needed. The service continues to work with partner agencies, including schools, education, health and mental health services, to ensure the availability of appropriate services and resources.

Identifying and planning for those support needs is critical to the successful outcome of every adoption placement. For children, this process starts from the earliest point of the social care's involvement; by the time a child is referred to the Adoption Panel for matching of placement for adoption, a comprehensive assessment of needs will have been completed and incorporated in the Child's Permanence Report (CPR). Similarly, the support needs of prospective adopters will have formed an integral part of their assessment and approval and will be identified in the Prospective Adopters Report. These two elements will be brought together during the matching process, and the support services to be provided will be clearly set out in the Adoption Placement Report and the Adoption Placement Plan. These reports will indicate whether an identified service might need to last more than 3 years and a commitment can be made to provide this.

The support needs of birth families will similarly be considered throughout the process, including most importantly arrangements for contact between the birth family and the child post-placement.

Swindon Adoption Service will retain responsibility for the provision of support services for three years after an adoption order has been made for all children placed by the Service, (including those placed with Adopters approved by another agency), and for as long as needed for all children / families living within the Authority's boundaries. Primary responsibility for co-ordinating the delivery of the agreed support services during the post-placement / pre-adoption stage rests jointly with the child's social worker and the adopters' supervising social worker. Post-adoption support will be provided according to the individual needs of the case.

For Swindon children placed with adopters approved by another agency and/or outside of Swindon area, the responsibility after three years from Adoption Order granted rests with the Local Authority in which the child and family are living.

Agency's Adoption Support Advisor. The following services are available:

a) For Adopters & Adoptive Families

Post-Approval Training

The Agency offers a range of training opportunities to approved adopters, on subjects such as Stage One, Stage Two, Core Concepts of Attachment, Managing Challenging Behaviour, Extended Family, Taking without Asking,

Wishful Thinking, Talking about Adoption and Playing Therapeutically to promote attachment. Training may be delivered both 'in-house' and externally purchased. Inclusion in all training is free to participants.

Adoption UK

Adoption UK and Swindon Borough are working in partnership to provide local group meetings and a 'buddying' service for all adopters whether or not they are members of Adoption UK.

Swindon Borough Council will pay at least two year's individual member's subscription to 'Adoption UK' for Swindon approved adopters and adopters resident in Swindon which entitles them to receive regular mailings and to participate in Support Groups organised regionally. Adoption UK can also provide individual support to adopters, accessed through their regional co-ordinator, herself an experienced adopter.

After Adoption

From April 1st 2013 Swindon Borough Council has contracted with this agency for the provision of Independent Adoption Support Services to all parties to Adoption who are either residents of the Borough or with whom the Agency were involved in placement arrangements. The agreement includes the provision of Intermediary Services by After Adoption on our behalf. Leaflets advising of the range of services will be freely available.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

There is a CAMHS provision in Swindon. Services are provided through a multi-disciplinary team of child psychiatrists and therapists based at Marlborough House.

Cornerstone

This is an organisation which has been funded on a 12 month pilot basis as part of the transition into the Regional Adoption Agency (Adopt Thames Valley) and will be offering a mentoring service to prospective and approved adoptive parents at different stages of their adoption journey. This mentoring support would be offered by experienced adoptive parents. Cornerstone will also be offering some Restorative Parenting training courses for adoptive parents and those waiting for an adoption match with children.

Other Therapeutic Services

Ear-marked funding is available for the purchase of specialist therapeutic intervention to assist adopters and children struggling with attachment difficulties. Most of this work is now funded via the Adoption Support Fund, as referred to below.

Adoption Support Fund

On 24th January 2013, the Department for Education (DfE) published their report 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding more loving homes', setting out their proposals to attract adopters and improve the support available to adoptive families. This led to the implementation of the Prototype Adoption Support Fund in December 2013. Now with a simplified application process and refined funding criteria the Adoption Support Fund was opened to all 152 Local Authorities in England on 1st May 2015. All Local Authorities are encouraged to make applications for funding to provide pre and post-adoption therapeutic support. In January 2016, it was announced that funding for the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) will continue, increasing year-on-year, for the next four years. Swindon Borough Council adoption service has been proactive in ensuring that therapeutic needs of children and their adoptive families are met by commissioning a wide range of services via the Adoption Support Fund. Adoptive parents also have access to a psychologist/therapist who offers consultation surgeries within the adoption service.

Financial Support

Financial support may be available to adopters under the terms specified in the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005, Part 3, paragraphs 8 – 12, subject to individual assessment of need.

Out of Hours Support

Emergency Duty Service

Swindon Borough Council has a team of social workers available outside office hours to offer emergency social work support to all client groups. The service can offer telephone advice, and has access to placement information and emergency placements with foster carers. In extreme circumstances, EDS workers will visit to offer assistance and support to adopters.

Fostering & Adoption Team Out of Hours Service

In addition to the above Emergency Duty Service, the Fostering & Adoption Team also operates a full-time out-of-hours support service to both foster carers and adopters in the form of a telephone advice line staffed on a voluntary rota basis by members of the team. The service is available exclusively to foster carers and adopters. The service does not however provide for home visits, and in the event of a crisis necessitating direct action the duty officer will refer on to the Emergency Duty Service.

Engaging our partner agencies such as Health and Education, to ensure the provision of universal services, along with relevant voluntary and

independent agencies, remains a key component of our developing support services.

b) For Birth Families

In addition to the ongoing involvement of the child's social worker, the following independent services have been commissioned to provide support services:

"After Adoption"

The Adoption Service has contracted with After Adoption to provide independent support and counselling to the birth parents of children placed for adoption, and can offer this service to other birth relatives by arrangement. The support offered includes:

- Individual Counselling
- Group for parents whose children have been adopted.
- Supervision of contact post-adoption
- Assistance with 'letter-box' contact (eg help with letter-writing)
- Provision of Intermediary Services for Adults wishing to trace birth relatives

Financial Support

The Adoption Service will meet the reasonable costs incurred by birth families in contact arrangements with their adopted children where these are by agreement or subject of a Contact Order made by the Court.

Assessing Needs for Adoption Support Services Post-Adoption

An adoptive family can ask for an assessment of need for adoption support services at any time while the child is under 18. If this is within 3 years of the adoption order, the placing authority will be responsible for arranging the assessment, but may ask another authority to do this on its behalf. After that time, the request for an assessment should be made to the Adoption Service in whose area the family is living. However, Swindon will retain responsibility for any on-going financial commitment made at the time of the child's placement for adoption or in the subsequent three years.

Where a request is received by Swindon Adoption Service for an assessment of Adoption Support Needs, the Adoption Support Services Advisor will determine how the assessment will be undertaken. Where the request occurs within the first year of the Adoption Order being made, the assessment may be undertaken by the child's social worker or the Adopter's Supervising Social Worker/ Officer. After the first year, unless there has been on-going involvement with the family, the initial assessment will be undertaken by one of the adoption workers in the Fostering & Adoption Team.

The assessment will build on the assessments and needs identified at the time of matching and placement and include the following elements:

- The needs of the person being assessed and how they might be met
- The needs of the adoptive family and how they might be met
- The needs, including developmental needs, of an adoptive child and how they might be met
- The parenting capacity of the adoptive parent
- Wider family and environmental factors
- The circumstances that led to the child being so placed and matched
- Any previous assessment of needs for adoption support services

Once the assessment has been completed the following steps will be taken:

- The person/adoptive family who have been assessed must be given formal notice of the proposed decision and allow time for representations to be made
- If the proposal is to provide services, the local authority must provide an adoption support plan in writing except where the service is provided on only one occasion or the service is only advice and information. The adoption support plan should include:
 - The services to be provided
 - What it is hoped the service will achieve.
 - How the success of the service will be measured and evaluated
 - The timescales for providing the service – when and for how long
 - When and how the plan will be reviewed
 - Who is the named person who will monitor the provision of the services according to the plan

It should be noted that, whilst the Adoption Agency has a duty to assess the need for adoption services if requested, there is no statutory obligation to provide those services even if identified as appropriate. However, Swindon Adoption Service recognises the uniqueness of the adoptive relationship and the lifetime commitment involved, and accepts its general responsibility to do everything possible to support adoptive families to ensure successful outcomes. The aim is to provide an environment where adoptive families are encouraged to keep in touch with the adoption team so that they can be supported to access and use services which are:

- Responsive to their needs
- Prevent difficulties increasing
- Part of the ongoing programme of support and training available to all adopters
- Provided by other parts of Children Services and Primary Care Trust delivered in integrated teams

In this way we aim to make assessment a continuous process of dialogue built on the assessment of adoption support needs identified at matching and placement. Essential to this process is recognition that adoption always brings

challenges and that adoptive families benefit from being part of the “adoption community”. In Swindon this adoption community is fostered by activities for adoptive families during school holidays, and training and support sessions for adopters as well as adoptive families having a named adoption worker who they can access directly.

Recruitment, Assessment, Preparation, Approval and Support of Prospective Adopters

People who are interested in becoming adoptive parents are given clear information about the two stages of the assessment process and timescales. Out of hours requests for information are received by email and Council website. Staff will also offer enquirers the opportunity for a social work visit to their home, and as appropriate arrangements will be made for a visit at a mutually convenient time to discuss their interest in more detail, provide additional information about adoption and ensure the preparation, training, home study assessment and approval process are explained.

Once a potential adopter has received information about adoption they will either decide that adoption is not right for them, or will wish to move on to the next stage of the process by formally registering their interest to enter stage one of the process.

On receipt of the completed Registration of Interest Form the agency will decide within 5 working days whether or not to accept this, unless there are exceptional circumstances which mean longer is needed. Prospective adopters will be advised verbally within 5 working days of receipt of the Registration of Interest Form and the decision will subsequently be confirmed in writing.

During Stage One of the process The Adoption Service will also start the process to undertake references, health and statutory checks including a criminal records check.

Once Stage One is completed, prospective adopters will consider whether they want to proceed to Stage Two. The Adoption Manager then considers whether it is appropriate to proceed towards Stage Two and how this might be achieved.

Stage One begins when the agency notifies the adopter that they accept the Registration of Interest and should normally take no more than 2 months to complete. Prospective adopters will be asked to attend training sessions during Stage One.

The purpose of such sessions is to:

- Help enquirers confirm if adoption is right for them
- Help prepare adopters for the tasks involved and give them a realistic perspective of adoption

- Prospective adopters are also expected to attend further preparation and training sessions during Stage Two which focus on matching and post placement issues

We may need to advise enquirers at any stage of the process that we are unable to progress their enquiry. If this happens, the enquirer will be informed about the reason for this decision and advised of the Complaints Procedure mechanisms for appeal.

Once applicants have completed a Registration of Interest and this has been accepted, they are required to attend a preparation and training group in both Stage One and Stage Two of the assessment process. The purpose of the preparation and training event is to:

- Help enquirers to begin to consider the existing skills and abilities they already have and which will help them parent an adopted child, and to think about how they might develop and supplement those skills.
- Allow Social work observations from the group process and applicants' input to the sessions to provide the agency with information about the enquirers' suitability to proceed.
- The information sessions and preparation groups are run by social work staff and experienced adopters. Guest speakers are also involved and can include experienced adopters and foster carers, the agency medical adviser, and birth relatives.

The timing and the venue of preparation training courses is varied so as to meet the requirements of participants as much as is possible. Participants are informed that the preparation training is an essential requirement but if there are extenuating circumstances arrangements could be made for prospective adopters to attend training provided by another agency or to cover the training materials through home study or on an individual basis with the assessing social worker.

The preparation training utilises the Coram BAAF 'Preparing to Adopt' training materials.

Once applicants have entered Stage Two, an assessing social worker is allocated to them to advise and assist them through the process and when appropriate, undertake a home study using the Coram BAAF nationally recognised pro-forma. The Adoption Social Worker will ensure that the home study process is explained fully and progresses efficiently.

The Adoption Service endeavours to complete the assessment report and present it to Adoption Panel within the current timescales as laid down in national standards and guidelines. A working agreement is completed by the Social Worker and the applicant(s) at both Stage One and Stage Two which sets out the rights and obligations on both sides and schedules mutually agreed visiting times.

The Prospective Adopters Report covers the following areas:

- Applicant's details and genogram
- Matching considerations
- Accommodation
- Verification of identity, career history, agency enquiries, DBS, Local Authority, NSPCC checks
- Health issues
- At least three confidential personal references, not more than one of whom may be a relative, and where an applicant is employed in a child care capacity or with vulnerable people, an employer's reference will also be requested
- Applicant's background, education, employment, chronology, hobbies/interests
- Relationships past and present
- Support networks
- Children in the household (if applicable) and other adults in the household (if applicable)
- Childlessness/limitations of family size, motivation
- Lifestyle
- Valuing diversity
- Parenting capacity
- Financial considerations
- Placement considerations
- Post adoption support requirements

The applicants are required to have full medical examinations of their physical and emotional health. These are paid for by the Adoption Service.

Applicants are required to nominate two personal referees who are not relatives. Family members however will also be visited if they will be closely involved in the adoption process or offer care for a child. Ex-partners and employers will also be contacted for references if the agency deems this to be necessary to the process.

When the assessment report is completed the applicant(s) will be provided with a copy of the report and will be given 5 working days to consider it and make any comments. They should sign and return the report before it is booked onto the next available Adoption Panel. If the applicants wish to waive the 5 working day period they can do so providing they are given sufficient time to read and sign the report and a written record of this waiver is placed on file.

All prospective adopter assessments, including those of applicants interested in Inter-Country Adoption, are undertaken by social workers in the Adoption Team.

On completion of the assessment report, the application is considered by the agency's adoption panel (see above). Applicants are invited to attend the

panel in person, and are provided in advance with an information leaflet explaining the purpose of the meeting and the panel procedures. Applicants will have had prior sight of the assessment report, and opportunity to comment on it in writing if they wish. They also have the opportunity to address any issues at the meeting.

When arriving at recommendations about individual applications the Panel is guided by the panel advisor who is responsible for ensuring that recommendations are consistent with statutory requirements, national standards, research evidence and borough council policy. In the event of disagreement, the Panel may make a request through the Chairperson for further expert advice or additional information. The Panel has immediate access to expert legal and medical advice. If consensus cannot be reached, individual members of the Panel can have their views clearly recorded in the Panel minutes.

The Panel's recommendations about approval are fully minuted by the panel clerk and passed, through the Panel Chairperson, to the Agency Decision Maker who will make the final decision on behalf of the agency. Where there has been lack of consensus about the recommendation or particular difficulties about reaching a recommendation this is drawn to the attention of the Agency Decision Maker by the Chairperson.

Where the agency considers that the applicants are not suitable to adopt, the applicants are given information about all of their options. Further details about the options will be provided on request.

Following approval, the adopters will continue to be supported by an allocated Supervising Social Worker whose task is to assist them in identifying a suitable match with a child / children awaiting adoption. The worker will also assist in assessing any adoption support needs arising from a proposed match, and identifying how these will be met. Approved Adopters will be offered opportunities to increase their knowledge and understanding of adoption through access to on-going training, both before and after a placement has been made.

The Supervising Social Worker will remain allocated to the family until an Adoption Order has been made, and beyond if necessary, subject to any other adoption support services being provided.

Complaints Procedure

All adult parties to the Adoption Process (Adopters and Birth Families) have access to the agency's established complaints procedures, about which written information is available on request. The leaflet includes the address and telephone number of Ofsted. Staff are fully conversant with the procedures, and comprehensive guidance exists on how complaints should be handled.

All looked after children, including those placed for adoption, have a copy of the 'Children's Guide to the Fostering Service' which contains information on how to make a complaint.

A 'Children's Guide to Adoption' is given to every child placed for adoption (or to their prospective adopter), and includes the name and address of the Children's Commissioner.

In summary, the Borough's complaints procedure involves three stages:

Where the complaint cannot be resolved by the relevant Team Manager within 10 days (or a negotiated longer period (Stage 1) an Independent Manager will be appointed to investigate (Stage 2). This should take no longer than three months.

If the complainant is still not satisfied, referral to an Independent Review Panel can be requested which will consider the complaint and make recommendations to the Director of Children Services. The Director will then confirm the outcome in writing.

Customers of Council Services can refer more serious or unresolved complaints to the Ombudsman.

Any complaint or concern about a child involving possible injury or harm to a child will be investigated under existing Multi-Agency Child Protection Procedures.

Adoption Service provides regular and numerous reports, including an annual report which reflects necessary statistics about their activity.

The adoption service completes and submits the following reports:

- Adoption annual report to Corporate Parenting Advisory Board
- Annual Dataset to Ofsted
- Quarterly reports to Adoption Leadership Board
- Annual adoption surveys to Ofsted

APPENDIX 1

Panel Composition:

Swindon's Adoption Panel is made up as follows:

CHAIRPERSON

Kate O'Brien – independent chair

CENTRAL LIST

Janice Cox - independent
Pia Pennington - independent
Sue Thurtle - independent
Cllr Carol Shelley - Cllr
Cllr Cathy Martin - Cllr
Olga Papacchini – medical advisor
Nerys Hughes – panel advisor
Kelly Johnson – panel administrator

PANEL ADVISORS (Non-Panel Members)

Andrew Ferguson - Legal Advisor
(SBC Head of Litigation & Personal Services)
Nerys Hughes - Professional Advisor
(SBC Assistant Team Manager (Adoption)

CLERK TO THE PANEL

Fostering & Adoption Team, Business Support Administrator

APPENDIX 2

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)

From April 2007 Ofsted has been the public body responsible for monitoring, regulating and inspecting Adoption services provided by both Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies, under the provisions of the Care Standards Act 2000.

All enquiries or contact with Ofsted should be addressed to:

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