

THURROCK COUNCIL ADOPTION SERVICE

In Alliance with



**Adopt East
Thurrock Council
Adoption Agency
Statement of Purpose**

2024-2025

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Legal Context	3
3. Aims and Objectives	4
4. Values and Vision	5
5. Management and Organisational Structure	5
6. Services Provided by Adopt East Essex	9
7. Recruitment, Preparation, Assessment and Support to Prospective Adopters	10
8. Adoption Panel	16
9. Monitoring of Children's Plans	17
10. Preparation of Children for Adoption	17
11. Support to Placements	18
12. Adoption Support – Birth Parents	19
13. Adoption Support – Adopters and Adopted Children	20
14. Adoption Support Fund	21
15. Intercountry Adoption	21
16. Non-Agency and Step-Parent Adoption	22
17. Special Guardianship Support Services	22
18. Complaints	23
19. Allegations in Respect of Children Placed for Adoption	24
20. Reviewing the Statement of Purpose	24
21. The Registration Authority	25
22. Contacts	25

1. Introduction

This Statement of Purpose sets out the principles, values and aims and objectives of Thurrock Council Adoption Agency. It contains information about the service, how it is monitored and operates to benefit children.

Our overarching aim is to provide secure and loving homes to children in need of permanence via adoption and to support those children and their families as long as is needed. We offer child-led and adopter friendly services by an experienced and motivated professional team.

Thurrock Council Adoption Service is a registered Adoption Agency and is subject to the Adoption Agency Regulations (AAR) 2005 and subsequent amendments (2012). Thurrock Council Adoption Agency is part of the Adopt East Alliance. Thurrock Council Adoption Agency is also referred to as Adopt East Thurrock, evidencing to the adoption community that they are part of Adopt East operating in the Thurrock Local Authority area. However, the registered name of the agency remains Thurrock Council Adoption Agency.

The Statement of Purpose provides information for children and young people, birth relatives, prospective and approved adopters, elected members, adoption panel members' staff, members of the public and other stakeholders.

2. Legal Context

The Adoption Service complies with all relevant legislation:

- The Children Act 1989
- Standard 18 of the Adoption Minimum Standards 2011 (Care Standards Act 2000)
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003
- The Inter-Country Adoption (Hague Convention) Regulations 2003
- The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005
- The Adoption and Children (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005
- The Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005
- Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012.
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- The Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- National Minimum Standards (Adoption Services) 2014
- The Statutory Adoption Guidance amended 2014
- The Children and Families Act 2014
- Special Guardianship Regulations 2005 amended by Special Guardianship (Amendment) Regulations 2016

The framework is designed to ensure the service is accountable and defines practice and actions undertaken within the service.

3. Aims and Objectives

The Adoption Act 2002 promotes adoption as a permanence option for Children in Care. The Act places the needs and welfare of the child at the centre of the adoption process, with the welfare of the child being the paramount consideration for a court or adoption agency in all decisions relating to their adoption.

Adopt East Thurrock supports the ethos that children and young people are best able to develop close and enduring relationships within a family setting. Adopt East Thurrock aims to ensure that all children whom they place within adoptive families will experience stability, security and quality of care throughout their childhood and into their adulthood.

Where children from Thurrock Local Authority are unable to live within their birth family and a plan for adoption is agreed, the Adoption Agency aims to identify an adoptive family who will promote the child's wellbeing through the provision of the highest possible standards of care in line with their individual assessed needs.

The objectives of Adopt East Thurrock are to:

- Meet the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, associated standards, regulations and guidance
- Ensure the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process as outlined in the Welfare Checklist (Adoption and Children Act 2002: s1)
- Support the process of timely decision making for children in relation to permanence options including the use of Early Permanence Placements
- Promote best practice in adoption through the provision of advice and support children's social work colleagues with the care planning process
- Undertake high quality marketing, recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters able to meet the diverse needs of children for whom adoption is the plan
- Ensure that recruitment of prospective adopters is targeted to meet the diverse needs of children with a plan for adoption
- Offer timely information and advice to members of the public enquiring about adoption
- Ensure the assessment and preparation of adoptive families is comprehensive and robust in order that adopters are aware of and prepared to meet the needs of children for whom adoption is the plan
- Provide child centred, needs led matching, transition and placement processes for children
- Provide a comprehensive adoption support service for adopted children and young people and their parents, adopted adults and birth family members
- Support the provision of other permanent placements such as Special Guardianship

- Recognise that all children and young people are unique individuals and therefore offer them the individual support and care that they need
- Ensure all staff involved in adoption have the appropriate level of skill, knowledge and experience to deliver an effective service
- Regularly review and evaluate to ensure services delivered are of the highest possible standard, are compliant with the Adoption National Minimum Standards and associated legislation and continue to meet the needs of the children and families in receipt of our services.

4. Values and Vision

Thurrock Children's Services has a vision that Thurrock is a place where people of all ages, particularly the most vulnerable, are able to lead happy, independent lives and fulfil their potential. With this in mind, Adopt East Thurrock aims to provide services that meet the individual needs of Children in Care for whom adoption is the plan as identified through the assessment, care planning and reviewing process. This will include the identification and provision of wraparound support, education and health provision, and additional therapeutic intervention, in order to enable children to reach their full potential.

The values which underpin the work of the service as an adoption agency are outlined in the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014 which aim to ensure the following:

- The service is anti-discriminatory and anyone accessing the service is treated with courtesy, respect and dignity.
- All enquiries to the service are managed in a timely and efficient manner.
- Adopt East Thurrock will work in partnership with other Adopt East partners, Regional Adoption Agencies, Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies to promote positive outcomes for children.
- In recognition of the lifelong implications of adoption, the service will ensure that appropriate support services are available to all those whose lives are impacted by adoption, i.e. children and young people, adopters, adopted adults and birth family members.
- All those accessing services from Adopt East Thurrock will be made aware of how to comment or complain about the service they receive and have access to external complaints mechanisms as required by legislation, regulation and guidance.
- The service recognises that all children and young people are unique individuals and therefore will offer them the individual support and care they need.

In addition to these values Adopt East Thurrock is committed to supporting the children and adults we work with, by understanding their life experiences in relation to race, ethnicity, culture, gender sexuality and disability through an intersectional lens, and how this influences the services and support we provide.

In particular when working with children and adults from the Global Majority, we will consider the impact of historical and present experiences of racism, and the support that can be provided in relation to this.

5. Management and Organisational Structure

Governance responsibility for Thurrock Council Adoption Agency rests with the elected members. The Adoption Agency forms part of Thurrock Children's Services directorate. The Directorate is headed by the Director of Children's Services, Shelia Murphy. The structure chart below shows the structure of Thurrock Council Adoption Agency.

Janet Simon, Assistant Director – Children's Social Care. Janet has overall responsibility for the Adoption Service and is Thurrock's Agency Decision Maker.

Tel: +44 (0) 1375 652231

Email: jsimon@thurrock.gov.uk

Janet's qualifications include a Post Graduate Diploma Social Work, and she is registered with Social Work England. Janet has worked in senior management roles since 2006.

The Head of Service responsible for adoption services is Elise McQueen. Elise is also the Agency Decision Maker for the Fostering Service

Tel: +44 (0) 1375 652763

Email: Elise.McQueen@thurrock.gov.uk

Elise is a qualified and registered Social Worker with extensive management experience in children's social care.

The Service Manager for the Adoption Service is Elizabeth Shields.

Liz is a qualified and registered Social Worker, having gained a MA in social work from the University of Manchester in 2007. In addition, Liz holds a Bachelor of Arts degree as well as Post Qualifying Social Work Levels 1-3 from Royal Holloway University and a Practice Educator Qualification from Brunel University. Liz has worked for CAF/CASS and then in numerous social work teams within Local Authorities, working primarily with Looked After Children, in court teams and undertaking fostering and connected persons assessments and post order work. Liz joined Thurrock on a permanent basis in January 2023.

Email: elizabeth.shields@thurrock.gov.uk

Alongside the governance structure of Thurrock Council Adoption Agency, Adopt East – Thurrock also has a governance structure in place as part of the Adopt East Alliance. Through a formal collaboration agreement, Thurrock Council forms part of the Adopt East Alliance.

The Alliance has a governance structure by way of three management boards:

- Directors for Children Services Board
- Senior Leadership Board
- Regional Practice Board

Team Manager – Sally Medbury

Sally Medbury is the Manager for the Adoption Team in Thurrock. She qualified as a social worker in 2001 and holds the DIPSW, BSc in Social Work and the Post Qualifying Childcare Award. She has extensive experience as a social worker and has worked across Children's Services within Local Authorities across London and Essex. Sally was the adoption family finding senior practitioner in Thurrock from 2014 and was appointed as Adoption Team Manager in 2018.

Staff members are social work qualified with access to appropriate training, supervision, and support. The social workers specialise in either family finding, adopter recruitment and assessment or adoption support work. They are able to work across the 3 areas where necessary. Staff members are from diverse backgrounds and heritage and are able to promote equality and diversity.

Staff hold the minimum qualification of CQSW/DipSW or equivalent and nearly all staff possess a university degree.

All Social Work qualified staff are registered with Social Work England.

The Adoption Team is an established and experienced team with the majority at senior practitioner level who are committed to providing a high-quality service.

The culture of the team is of continual learning and all staff are encouraged to extend their qualifications by attending relevant training.

Social workers are supported in their roles by administrative/specialist staff providing dedicated support in the following areas:

- Letterbox Contact/Keeping in Touch exchange
- Tracking Stage 1 and Stage 2, adoption enquiry and assessment processes
- Management information and tracking
- Processing of ASF administration
- Processing post order allowances
- Supporting with the recruitment of prospective adopters

The role of the Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA) is undertaken by the Adoption Manager who often delegates elements of this role to Senior Practitioners.

The service has Fostering and Adoption Panels which meet fortnightly. One Adoption Panel Advisor and administrator coordinate panel activity, including the quality assurance of reports presented to Panel, maintenance of the Panel member central list and

scheduling panels to meet the needs of the service in respect of adopter approvals and matches.

Adopt East – Thurrock Council Adoption Agency

Dr Dave Smith - Chief Executive

Shelia Murphy – Executive Director for Children’s Services

Janet Simon – Assistant Director of Children’s Services

Elise McQueen – Head of Service for CLA

Ex Head of
Adopt East

Elizabeth Shields – Fostering, Adoption, Placements and CWD Service Manager

Andra Marc - Adoption Panel Advisor

2 FTE – Fostering and Adoption Recruitment
Officers

Peter Turner - Independent Adoption Panel Chair

Sally Medbury –
Adoption Team
Manager

**1 FTE Senior
Administrator**

**5 FTE Senior
Practitioners**

1 FTE Social Worker

**2 FTE Life Story
Workers /
Letterbox
Co-ordinators**

**1 FTE Financial
Assessment
Officer**

6. Services Provided by Adopt East Thurrock

The Adoption Teams deliver services that enhance the recruitment, assessment and training of adopters, the speedy and safe placement of children and appropriate follow-on support. Adopt East Thurrock recognise the lifelong implications of adoption for children, adopters and birth family members and undertakes to provide support throughout the adoption life cycle, including services for adopted adults wishing to access their birth records.

Adopt East as a whole, recruit, assess and approve a range of adoptive families in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of Adopt East children for whom adoption is the plan including children with harder to place characteristics and sibling groups. Adopters are not limited to providing a family for Adopt East children but are also encouraged to look nationally for a child/children.

The service undertakes Family Finding activity for Thurrock Local Authority children to ensure early permanence planning for children where adoption is a primary or parallel plan is given appropriate priority. The service is responsible for the identification of matching requirements for children to ensure a match with the most appropriate adoptive family is achieved in a timely manner.

Adoption support services are provided for adopted children and young people, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth family members, recognising the lifelong journey for all parties as follows:

- Counselling, information, and support for birth parents whose children have a plan of adoption.
- Counselling for adopted adults in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Those wanting intermediary service to track birth relatives are signposted to appropriate independent agencies.
- Assessments of adoption support needs pre and post order and when appropriate will make applications to the Adoption Support Fund to support the provision of therapeutic services for adopted children and their families.
- Comprehensive adoption support for those affected by adoption in line with the Adoption Support Services Regulations, both prior to and after an Adoption Order has been made. This will include adoptive families unknown to the Agency who reside in the borough and request adoption support assessments three years after their Adoption Order was granted. Likewise, the team provides adoption support to adoptive families who have placements of Thurrock children but live outside of our area for a period of three years after the granting of the Adoption Order.

7. Recruitment, Preparation, Assessment and Support to Prospective Adopters

The following is a summary of Adopt East Thurrock procedure for the recruitment, preparation, assessment and support of prospective adopters.

Enquiries

The Adoption Agency provides a duty service to respond to enquiries from prospective adopters. Prospective adopters contacting the service are provided with written information about adoption within five working days.

Once an initial enquiry has been completed, prospective adopters will be invited to an Adoption Information Meeting which are delivered virtually on a bi-monthly basis. At the events, enquirers will be provided with 'real time' data about the numbers of children waiting, their age groups, and if they are to be placed as siblings across Adopt East.

Following the information meeting, a social worker will contact the participants for an adopter-led discussion, to enable social workers to get to know participants better and to help them make decisions about their readiness.

Should the enquirer decide to proceed to the next stage of the process, they will be sent a Registration of Interest form and once completed and returned, the Adoption Senior Administrator will process statutory checks and references. The enquirer will also be advised of the next steps to being Stage One.

Stage One Assessment

Once the Registration of Interest is returned, the enquirer will be given further information about Stage One of the assessment process, including: the Stage One Agreement form, information about statutory checks and Preparation Training.

Every effort is made to complete the work of Stage One within two months, unless there are clear reasons why it needs to take longer, for example when a statutory check is delayed.

Stage One of the process is 'adopter-led'. Applicants will be able to contact the Lead Stage One Senior Practitioner for support during this stage of the process. Adopt East Thurrock endeavour to support applicants in Stage One to broaden knowledge of adoption and children's needs and offer advice on how they can build on this knowledge and experience to support their role as adoptive parents.

Applicants are offered Preparation Training in Stage One with additional, optional modules prior to commencing Stage Two and post approval as appropriate. The training is

designed to help applicants to assess their own capacity and motivation to adopt a child by providing information, stimulating discussion, and meeting experienced adopters.

From July applicants will also be attending an additional training session about Early Permanence. The training is designed to help people understand the role of an Early Permanence Carer, how it differs from traditional adoption placements and the foster components of Early Permanence including contact, work with parents and the role of the Local Authority. The training includes meeting with experienced Early Permanence Carers, reflecting on their own capacity and motivation to adopt a child via an early permanence arrangement. This allows an element of self-selection for applicants who, having completed the Early Permanence training module, are able to decide whether or not early permanence is right for them.

Applicants will also be given the opportunity to attend the Adopt East adopting siblings virtual training if they wish.

None of the Preparation Training is formally assessed. However, if specific concerns arise, these will be shared with the individual after the groups, and with the assessing social worker. The group leaders write a brief, descriptive comment on the applicant's participation in the groups for inclusion in the Prospective Adopter's Report.

Statutory Checks

All statutory checks, including enhanced DBS checks and medicals are taken up as soon as the Registration of Interest is accepted. Applicants are aware that negative police/statutory checks may affect their application and, in some case, may result in rejection. References are taken up with Local Authorities where the applicants have lived over the past 10 years or longer if they have previously parented children whilst living within another Local Authority area. Applicants are advised to inform us of any adverse history or medical condition which any of these checks may reveal. If applicants work with or have previously worked with children or vulnerable adults, employers are asked whether there are any concerns of a safeguarding nature. This includes any voluntary work undertaken.

Other checks include employer checks, contacting adult children of the applicant/s and former partners with whom the applicant has lived with will also be sought.

Adoption Medical

Applicants will be asked to have their Adoption Medical as soon as their Registration of Interest is received. The Medical Advisor may follow up any concerns with the GP/hospital consultant. They will provide a summary of the applicant's medical information and any contra-indications to them becoming adoptive parents. The Medical Advisor's opinion is considered in assessing the applicants' suitability to progress to Stage One alongside other information.

After 2 months, the Adoption Team Manager will review the progress of the stage one process and decide to extend stage one if more information is still needed or to progress to stage two. An End of Stage One review meeting will be held with the applicants with the Lead Stage One Senior Practitioner, in order to discuss the progress of the application and the applicants experience of the process so far. A Stage One report will be written to summarise the information gathered. If checks and references are not yet complete the applicants will be given additional resources and advice for further learning.

Once all statutory references and checks are returned, this information will be reviewed again by the Adoption Manager and Social Worker to ascertain whether we have sufficient information for the applicants to continue on to Stage Two of the adoption process. Alongside whether or not they, and the agency, feel the timing is right for them to progress with their application.

At this point applicants can choose, if they wish, to take a break of up to six months between Stage One and Stage Two of the process. Sometimes as an adoption agency we may recommend a break, to also give time to resolve any housing, employment or other issues that may arise.

If a decision is made by the agency during or at the end of Stage One that the applicant is not suitable to progress to Stage Two Assessment, this will be discussed with the applicant and a written explanation of this decision will also be sent to them.

Stage Two Assessment

The agency and applicant will jointly agree a provisional start date for Stage Two. An assessing social worker is allocated, and a Stage Two Agreement meeting is held with the allocated social worker to plan the assessment and schedule presentation of the assessment to the Adoption Panel.

During Stage Two, if issues arise which the assessing social worker or manager believe might mean an applicant may not be approved by Panel, we may present a 'brief report' to Panel, setting out the concerns and their reasoning. Applicants may make representations in person or writing to Panel. If Panel recommends that the application should not be completed, and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is subsequently 'minded' deciding that the assessment should not be completed, the ADM will issue a 'qualifying determination', and inform the applicants of their options. The applicants are entitled to ask for their application to be reconsidered by the Adoption Panel, or to go the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). The recommendation of the subsequent Adoption Panel or of the IRM is then referred back to the ADM, who will consider all the information and reach a decision which will be final. If the applicants wish to make representations to the agency without accessing the IRM they have 45 days to make these representations in writing.

Applicants see their Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) and may contribute to it/correct factual information or attach their own written comments. They will usually have up to five

working days to complete this and are invited to attend the adoption panel at the time their suitability as adopters is considered.

In the course of the assessment, the topics listed in the PAR are covered, and if a couple, each applicant is expected to undergo at least one individual interview. Any children of the applicant/s will be involved in the assessment and their views obtained in an age-appropriate manner.

Interviewing Members of Extended Family/Adult Children

If members of the extended family are expected to play a particular role in an adopted child's life (e.g. by providing day care for a working parent) they will be interviewed.

Where possible adult children of the applicant/s, including those who live away from home, are interviewed. Where an interview is not possible, adult children will be written to seeking their comments on their parent's plans. The comments of adult children are taken seriously. They do not have an automatic veto, but their views are considered and followed up. If we can obtain their permission, their comments are shared with the applicants.

Where there are previous significant relationships or where applicants have jointly parented a child with a former partner, that partner will be contacted to request their view or concerns they may have about the applicant's ability to keep a child safe. If this is not possible/appropriate, an attempt to seek corroborative evidence will be made and the reason will be explained in the assessment report and the Panel will take a view of all the circumstances.

Referees

At least three personal referees will be interviewed for a single applicant and four for couples. One of these should be a family member for each applicant. Additional referees may be needed if there are issues about a particular stage in the applicant's life about which we need to obtain another view. A written summary of each interview is made. Consent to share the references will be discussed during the reference visit and also when shared in writing.

Second Time Applicants/Returning applicants

Second time applicants may be eligible for a fast-track process, for example the time elapsed since their previous adoption. Their assessments will build on their experience and concentrate on issues that the previous placement has raised as well as considering the needs of their existing child/ren and their needs in relation to a new placement.

Enquiries from second time adopters or foster carers wishing to be considered to adopt a child in their care will be offered an information sharing visit, sometimes called initial visit, to explore their current circumstances and the timing of their enquiry.

Following the information sharing visit, the social worker will write up a report of the visit indicating whether they recommend that the enquirer is invited on to Stage One. This will then be passed to the Team Manager for approval within 10 working days. A copy of this report and recommendation will be sent to the enquirer. If the decision is to invite them onto Stage One they will be sent a Registration of Interest Form (ROI). For second time adopters and foster carers, Stage One and Stage Two of the assessment process can run in parallel if appropriate following a positive recommendation from the information sharing visit.

As with first time enquirers, if the recommendation is not to invite the enquirer to commence Stage One they will be informed of they will also receive a copy of the initial visit report and be advised of the reasons for the recommendation.

Adoption Panel

Once the Prospective Adopter Report is completed, this is presented to the Adoption Panel to consider the application. The Panel then make a recommendation in relation to the applicants' suitability to be approved as prospective adopters. The recommendation is considered by the Agency Decision Maker, who makes the decision. If the applicant is dissatisfied with the outcome, they may make representations directly to the agency or via the Independent Review Mechanism. The procedure for applications that go to the IRM is outlined above.

Once the Agency Decision Maker has made a decision in respect of the applicant's suitability to adopt, they will be advised verbally by their social worker and in writing within five working days of the decision being made.

This represents the end of Stage Two.

Early Permanence Placements

Applicants who want to consider early permanence placements will be dually approved as prospective adopters and foster carers. This allows a child/children to be placed with them initially under fostering regulations, prior to the courts providing permission to place for adoption. This process will be discussed with applicants during their Stage Two Assessment and again at the point that an Early Permanence Placement is identified.

In some cases where there is an identified child, the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 were amended (in 2013) to allow approved prospective adopters to be given temporary approval as foster carers for a named child as set out in regulation 25A.

Review of Approved Adopters

The adoption team aim to match approved adopters and children at the earliest opportunity, working proactively with prospective adopters to enable safe and timely placements to be made. The focus is on securing the right placements for children which may mean there is an interval between a prospective adopter being approved and a child being placed.

Adopt East Thurrock are members of the Adopt East Regional Adoption Alliance and as such share details of children and adopters waiting for placements in order to secure timely placements of children from across the Adopt East Region. As part of this alliance, waiting prospective adopters will be invited to attend regional events in relation to children waiting for placements and will be supported to consider potential links with these children as appropriate.

Where there is a significant change of circumstance, or if approved prospective adopters have not had a child placed within a year of being approved (and similarly if they wait for a further period of a year without a placement) a review of their circumstances will be undertaken including:

- Placements that have been considered and why no placement resulted.
- Significant changes in circumstances
- Changes in relation to the characteristics of children for whom the adopter wishes to consider.
- The prospective adopters, views and wishes.
- Information from updated statutory checks – DBS updates
- Making a recommendation as to whether to continue the approved status of the adopter/s or not.

If, as a result of the review, there is a recommendation to terminate the approval, prospective adopters will be provided with a copy of report and will be able to add their comments to it. This will then be presented to the Adoption Panel, which prospective adopters will be invited to attend. As with the original approval process the Panel will make a recommendation regarding the prospective adopters' continued suitability which will then be considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). If the prospective adopters do not accept the ADM decision, the representations procedure or referral to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) is available at this stage as at the initial approval stage.

Family Finding and Matching Children with Adopters

The adoption team are responsible for undertaking all Family Finding activity for children referred to the service. This may include, where necessary, undertaking activity required to secure an Inter-Agency placement for a child for whom no internal match is available e.g. attendance at activity days, exchange days and referral to Linkmaker.

Decisions regarding progression of matches will be based upon the ability of prospective adopters to meet the assessed needs of the child which will be recorded and evidenced via a linking meeting held between a combination of the child's social worker, adopters' social worker, family finding social worker, adoption and childcare team managers, and chaired by a service manager.

Prospective adopters are supported by their social worker to make an informed decision as to whether or not a proposed match is right for them and their family. They are provided with written information and assessments about the child's needs and experiences, have an opportunity to meet the child's current foster carer and other key professionals involved with them including their social worker. They will also be provided with an opportunity for consultations with the Agency Medical Adviser. Child Appreciation Days will also be convened for some children.

Matches of children with prospective adopters are made on the basis of a child's holistic needs, including age, emotional and behavioural development as well as ethnicity, race and religion. A placement will not be delayed in order to find an exact ethnic/religious match if a family is available who can meet the child's other needs. However, transracial adopters will need to demonstrate how they can promote a child's positive sense of identity and this is a key matching consideration.

Social workers within the adoption team work closely with children's social workers and foster carers to support the assessment of the needs of individual children and those within a sibling group to determine whether they are placed together or separately, and if to be separated, how each child's needs will be met in terms of attachments within the sibling groups and ongoing keeping in touch planning.

Any plans for post adoption keeping in touch (contact), direct or indirect, with the children's birth parents, siblings or relatives will be made after an assessment of the child's needs and any associated risks the birth family members may represent. Any proposed keeping in touch plans will be discussed with prospective adopters as part of the matching process.

Proposed matches between prospective adopters and specific children will be presented to the Adoption Panel for consideration and recommendation and the Agency Decision Maker will make the decision in respect of the match.

Matching and placement of children with Early Permanence Carers will follow a similar process although there is often limited information available about a child's health and development at the point that specific placements are being considered and matching will be driven by the agencies understanding of the child's background family factors and antenatal experience against the matching considerations that adopters have indicated during their assessment process that they would feel able to manage.

8. Adoption Panel

Adoption Panel Arrangements

The Adoption Agency Regulations require that all Adoption Agencies must establish a Panel to consider the circumstances of children who may require adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the placement of approved children with specific adopters. The Panel makes recommendations to Thurrock's Agency Decision Maker. The role of the Agency Decision Maker is undertaken by the following:

- Janet Simon – Assistant Director of Children's Services
- Elise McQueen – Head of Looked After Children and Care Leavers

The Adoption Agency Advisor, in consultation with the Independent Chair, will ensure that the training needs of Panel Members are regularly considered and that opportunities for training are provided.

The Adoption Agency Advisor ensures that there is a balanced representation on the Panel. In line with the requirements of the Adoption Minimum Standards, a 'Central List' of Adoption Panel Members has been established.

All Panel members, including the Independent Chairperson, will be subject to annual appraisals.

9. Monitoring of Children's Plans

Adopt East Thurrock undertakes close tracking of cases, through the Gateway Stage (PLO) and care proceedings, to ensure assessments and decision making is timely, so that where a child's plan is Adoption, Placement Order applications are made within timescales.

Parallel/Permanency Planning begins at the PLO stage and is tracked by the new Permanency Manager and the adoption team. Permanency Tracking Panels (PTP) are also held weekly for children subject to care proceedings and enables the service to consider best options available for securing permanency planning in a timely manner.

In reaching a decision about adoption, Adopt East Thurrock will consider the views and wishes of the child, his or her family and current carers in conjunction with assessments completed of birth family or potential connected-person carers.

When considering a particular adoptive placement for a child, Adopt East Thurrock will look carefully at the assessed needs of that child and the parenting capacity of the adoptive family to ensure that it is the best available match and that it will meet the assessed needs of the child. Arrangements for transitioning children to adoptive carers

will be undertaken through a planned process that takes account of the individual circumstances and needs of the child and adopters.

10. Preparation of Children for Adoption

The child's social worker, family finding social worker and foster carer will work together to prepare children in an individualised age-appropriate manner and may include use of the Adopt East – Guide to Adoption, story books about adoption, various direct work activities to ascertain the child's wishes and feelings.

Once a match has been identified, presented to the Fostering and Adoption Panel for consideration and agreed by the ADM, a family book will be provided to the child to begin the transition process. For very young children and babies, laminated pictures, toys and books with voice recordings of the adopters, and items of clothing or a soft toy from the adopters' home are also introduced to the child as a means of promoting a sensory link for them.

In line with the age and understanding of individual children, visual calendars are prepared and provided to the child to support their understanding of the process and timeframes and what will be happening on each day.

Every child placed for adoption should have a Life Story Book and a Later Life Letter within ten days of an Adoption Celebration Hearing being granted in line with Thurrock Council's policy and procedure and statutory guidance. The Later Life Letter is provided by the child's social worker and the Adoption Team Life Story Worker will provide the Life Story Books. Every effort is made to provide the child with the fullest possible family history in order to help the child make sense of their family heritage, including use of photographs and art work/drawings.

The Later Life Letter gives the child an explanation of why he/she was adopted and the reasons and actions that led up to this decision being made. This should include, wherever possible, the people involved in the decision making, and the facts at that time. The letter is in addition to the child's Life Story Book and not a substitute for the book.

11. Support to Placements

All adopters have an allocated adoption social worker who, wherever possible, will be the same worker throughout their process of approval, matching and placement. Once a placement has been made, the child's social worker will hand over to the adoption family finding social worker who will then be involved in supervising and supporting the child in placement.

Children placed for adoption by Adopt East Thurrock will be subject to statutory reviews in accordance with the Adoption & Children Act 2002. This will involve an Independent

Reviewing Officer from the Local Authority who will ensure that all aspects of the child's welfare and plans for his/her future are progressing satisfactorily.

Based on assessments carried out under the Adoption Support Regulations, there may be a need to provide financial support to some adoptive families, subject to certain conditions. To fulfil this, the Local Authority has a means tested scheme for the payment of financial support in specified circumstances. Any payments agreed are subject to annual review.

Where a placement for adoption ends in an unplanned way, the Adoption Agency will convene a disruption meeting to consider what has happened and to help with planning for the future. Reports of placements that end in this way and the outcome of subsequent meetings will be shared with the Adoption Panel in order to support learning and practice development.

12. Adoption Support – Birth Parents

It is acknowledged that most birth parents will find it difficult to accept that they can no longer parent their children and that an adoption placement represents the best outcome for the child. As an Adoption Agency, Adopt East Thurrock fully supports the principle that birth parents and birth families are entitled to services which recognises the lifelong implication of adoption.

The child's social worker and adoption social workers have a key role in supporting birth families. Birth parents are offered counselling and support, where the purpose of the support is to ensure that the alternatives to adoption have been explored and the implications of adoption are fully discussed. It also offers birth parents the opportunity to express their views in relation to the plans for the child, and to be involved in planning for the child's future wherever possible. Where the offer of support is accepted, the social worker makes the necessary arrangements for a referral for independent support to be made.

Counselling and support to birth parents includes the following areas:

- Explaining the key stages of the adoption process and likely timescales
- Explaining the role of the Adoption Panel/Agency Decision Maker
- Explaining the role of CAFCASS in witnessing consent or acting as the Children's Guardian
- Explaining how the Adoption Contact Register works and how an adopted adult may seek information about the birth family in the future or register a wish not to be contacted.
- Explaining how prospective adoptive parents are assessed.
- Ascertaining the parent/s' views on the adoption plan, including the selection of the adoptive family, any specific ethnic, cultural, or religious needs of the child,

and any plan to separate a sibling group. Their views on these issues should be considered and balanced with the needs of the child.

- Where there is parental consent for the adoption, explaining the process for giving their written consent to an adoptive placement or advance consent to the adoption (including the role of CAF/CASS), their right to state that they do not wish to be informed of an adoption application, and that they have the right to withdraw their consent to an adoptive placement at any time up to the making of an adoption application, but the restriction of their rights to do so after an adoption application has been made
- Ascertaining the parent/s' views on post-placement and post-adoption keeping in touch including whether they would wish to meet the adoptive family and, if so, how they might prepare for this
- Where birth parents refuse or decline to accept counselling and/or support, the child's social worker records the attempts made to persuade the parents and the reasons for their refusal.

13. Adoption Support – Adopters and Adopted Children

Adoption support is defined as including:

- Assessment of adoption support needs
- Financial support to adopters, following an assessment of need.
- Priority access to social housing, and access to additional support to cover a spare room whilst adopters wait for their child to arrive in their new home
- Priority admission for school places, including academies and free schools.
- Services to enable groups of adoptive children and adoptive parents to discuss matters relating to adoption.
- Assistance, including mediation, with keeping in touch agreements between adopted children and their birth parents or others with whom they share a significant relationship.
- Therapeutic services for adopted children.
- Assistance to adoptive parents and children to support the adoptive placement and enable it to continue.
- Assistance to adoptive parents and children where a placement disrupts or is at risk of disruption.
- A range of support services, including access to counselling, information and advice for both adoptive parents and their children, who may have complex needs.
- Applications to the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund as appropriate following an assessment of their adoption support needs.

Adopt East Thurrock recognises the importance of supporting adopters and their families to access a wide range of support provision, to ensure placement stability, and to help

secure positive lifelong outcomes for the child. Thurrock Council provides assessment of adoption support needs via its adoption team. Referrals can be made direct by contacting PostadoptionSGO@thurrock.gov.uk during business hours. The duty worker will take a referral and, if required, a Social Worker will be allocated to complete an assessment of need which should take up to six weeks. In some situations (e.g. where the threshold for Child in Need or Child Protection is met) a joint assessment with another team in Children's Services may be undertaken. The Adoption Team Manager will confirm when this is required.

At the point of matching, all children must have an adoption support plan which sets out both the prospective adopters and child support needs including one-off expenses or ongoing financial support if assessed as appropriate. Where on-going financial support is provided, the adopters will undergo a financial assessment and annual review once finance is agreed.

Following the granting of an Adoption Order, the adoptive family can approach the Local Authority for an assessment of their adoption support needs until their children are aged 18 or 25 years if they have a statement of educational need.

14. Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund

On the 01 May 2015, the government launched the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), now called the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF). The fund has been established to help to pay for therapeutic services for children up to and including the age of 21 years (or 25 with a SEN statement) who have been adopted from Local Authority Care in England or adopted from Wales but living in England.

On 14th January 2016, the government announced that the fund could also be applied for to provide therapeutic support to children from the point at which they are placed with their adoptive families. It is important to note that the fund is not a right for all adopted children but is based upon assessed need.

In order to access the fund, families will need to have an assessment of their adoption support needs completed by the Local Authority. If the social worker undertaking the assessment identifies that therapeutic services would be beneficial, they can then make an application to the fund on behalf of the family and, if successful, the fund will release the money to the Local Authority subject to monthly invoicing. From 1st April 2016, the fund was also made available to families who have adopted children from outside England from other UK countries and via inter-country adoption arrangements.

Adopt East Thurrock are responsible for undertaking assessments of adoption support needs pre and post order, and families and other professionals (with the family's consent) are able to refer to the service to request such an assessment by contacting the Adoption Duty Social Worker on [01375 652647](tel:01375652647) / PostadoptionSGO@thurrock.gov.uk or pre-Adoption Order talking to their adoption social worker.

15. Intercountry Adoption

Adopt East Thurrock will refer applicants for intercountry adoption to a commissioned provider (The IAC) who will assess and liaise with the Department for Education when required.

Applicants wishing to adopt a child from another country will be provided with information about the IAC service and adopting domestically. Applicants must satisfy the requirements and procedures of their country of choice.

All local authorities are now required to provide a comprehensive adoption support service. Intercountry adopters and intercountry adoptive children are entitled to an assessment of their needs for adoption support. Services which may be provided include counselling, advice, information, therapeutic services, services to ensure the continuation of a relationship, and services to assist in case of disruption of adoption placements.

The IAC Advice Line number is **020 8447 4753** or email is info@icacentre.org.uk

Ofsted Unique Reference Number is – SC386048

16. Non-Agency and Stepparent Adoption

These are adoptions which have not been arranged by an adoption agency and include stepchildren, adoption by other relatives/significant others and children conceived with the involvement of a donor or surrogate.

Adopt East Thurrock will give advice and guidance to those wishing to adopt a stepchild or another relative/significant other and will explore with enquirers whether or not adoption is the most appropriate legal order for the child.

Checks and references will be undertaken prior to an application to the Court. An allocated worker will be assigned to undertake the assessment and complete the Annex A report for court.

17. Special Guardianship Support Services

Every child needs to feel secure and settled in a family that loves and values them. That means strong attachments to adults who are committed to them long-term, who support their development, and who guide them through childhood to adulthood. A Special Guardianship Order is a way of providing a legally secure foundation for those carers who are caring for a child who is unable to live with their parents. When making a decision regarding an Order, the welfare of the child is of paramount consideration.

Under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, financial support and other services may be available for the Special Guardian, the child and the birth parents. However, if a child is not (or was not) looked after by a Local Authority, then there is no entitlement to an

assessment for Special Guardianship Support Services, although it is possible to make a request for this assessment.

Thurrock Council may be able to make arrangements for the provision of Special Guardianship Support Services which may include:

- Mediation to assist with new or existing contact arrangements.
- Counselling and advice and information
- Access to support groups
- Therapy services
- Training for the Special Guardian to meet the needs of the child
- Financial assistance following an assessment of need.

The Adoption Agency is responsible for the provision of support services for Special Guardians for the duration of up to three years following granting of the Order for families who live outside of Thurrock Borough. After three years, the Local Authority where the family reside are responsible for the provision of needs assessments and services.

18. Complaints

In seeking to constantly improve the quality of the adoption services, Thurrock Council welcomes and encourages feedback from service user's providers and partner agencies as an opportunity to learn lessons and put matters right. We also welcome comments or compliments as a way of learning about our practice and use them as an integrated part of our Quality Assurance processes.

Thurrock Council recognises that children, their birth parents, adoptive parents, prospective adopters and special guardians are best placed to identify the strengths and deficiencies of the adoption service and therefore, to inform the changes and developments needed to ensure continuing improvement.

The majority of such complaints will be dealt with under a complaints procedure established in line with **The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006** and the statutory guidance "**Getting the Best from Complaints**".

There is a framework in place for responding to and ensuring that the views of the parties in the adoption process are heard. All parties are advised of Thurrock Council's complaints procedure.

In most situations, areas of potential tension or conflict can be minimised through careful planning, open communication and early discussion/negotiation involving the child's social worker and/or the adoption social worker, as appropriate.

Any of the parties in the adoption process can use the complaints procedure if they have a dissatisfaction or concern with the service provided. This includes a complaint by:

- Any child who has been placed for adoption or placed under a special guardianship by the council - including adults who were formally adopted.

- A birth parent of a child who has been or is being adopted or is or will be subject to a Special Guardianship Order.
- Adoptive parents.
- Prospective adoptive parents during the preparation and assessment process and after approval whilst awaiting a placement.
- One person on behalf of another e.g. an adoptive parent on behalf an adopted child.
- Anyone granted a Special Guardianship Order or is seeking one.

Applicants to become adopters who are turned down for approval on the recommendation of the adoption panel and/or the decision of the agency decision maker are able to ask for their case to be referred to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). Details of this process with timescales will be made available to applicants during preparation and assessment.

The IRM has the following timescales:

- Applicants have 40 working days from the date of the letter confirming the panel's decision, to decide to contact the IRM.
- The adoption agency will be contacted to produce relevant documentation within
- 10 working days.
- The IRM will set up a panel within 3 months of the application.

Contact details for the IRM are as follows:

The Independent Review Mechanism Contract Manager

Unit 4, Pavillion Business Park,

Royds Hall Road

Leeds, LS12 6AJ

Tel: 0845 450 3956

Email: irm@irm.org.uk

www.independentreviewmechanism.org.uk

Information about the complaints procedure can be obtained from:

Complaints,

Thurrock Council,

Civic Offices,

New Road,

Grays,

RM17 6SL

Tel: 0800 021 3016

Email: complaints@thurrock.gov.uk

Information is also available on <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/how-to-complain/children-and-young-peoples-social-care-complaints>

Thurrock Council has applied a clear policy defining complaints and how they are dealt with.

19. Allegations in Respect of Children Placed for Adoption

Allegations in respect of children placed for adoption are dealt with in accordance with LSCB procedures and Adopt East Thurrock's procedures for managing allegations regarding such children.

The Southend, Essex and Thurrock (SET) Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures can be accessed online at -

<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/childrens-care-professionals-processes/child-protection-procedures>

20. Reviewing the Statement of Purpose

This Statement of Purpose will be reviewed annually, but may be amended at any time, in the light of major legislative or policy changes. This review will be carried out by the Service Manager for Adoption. This Statement of Purpose will next be reviewed in April 2024/5.

21. The Registration Authority

Quality Assurance of the Service is provided by both internally and externally. Internally the relevant managers are responsible for day to day oversight and Quality Assurance. There is the following additional functions for quality assurance:

- Adopt east (Via Matrix Management with the Executive Head)
- The Adoption Panel and Panel Advisor (Via feedback and Joint meetings with the ADM & Service Lead)
- The QA Service – (e.g. via audit)
- Commissioning (via a joint commissioning arrangement for services funded by the ASF)
- Complaints and Compliments (via thematic learning)

A report on the progress and performance of the adoption service is produced six monthly in April and October and provided to the DCS.

The service is also inspected the registration authority. The Registrations Authority is:

Ofsted Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA
Tel: 08456 404045
Email: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

Thurrock's Ofsted Unique Reference Number is – SC057173

22. Contacts

For more information about Adopt East – Thurrock's Adoption Service please contact:

Adopt East – Thurrock
Thurrock Adoption Agency

Civic Offices

New Road

Grays

Essex

RM17 6SL

Tele: 0800 652 1271

Email: fostering.adoption@thurrock.gov.uk

Web Address: www.thurrock.gov.uk