

SEEKING ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

This practice guidance sets out specific information regarding the following:

- Referral for adoptive family
- Considering specific needs with regard to ethnicity, religion, language and culture, and placement with siblings
- External Family Finding

1 Referral for adoptive family

Bradford Standard: Within 4 weeks of a Panel booking being made for a consideration of 'should be placed for adoption', a family finder will be allocated by an Adoption Team Manager during the Team Meeting or supervision.

The information gathered should be based on 'The Framework for assessment of Children in Need and their Families.' The document 'Practice Guidance in Assessing Adoption Support Needs' (DfES) contains a helpful chapter setting out matters for consideration under each aspect of the Assessment Framework.

The Referral Meeting provides the opportunity for the family finder to share expertise on major placement issues for the child based on adoption experience. These placement issues include assessing attachment, decisions about whether or not to place with siblings and achieving placement within a family which reflects the child's ethnicity, culture, religion and language.

It is essential to compile as full a picture of the child as possible, and to assess the capacity to make attachments.

2 Considering specific needs with regard to ethnicity, religion, language and culture, and placement with siblings

National Minimum Standards 2.2 'Children are matched with adopters who best meet their assessed needs. Wherever possible this will be a family which:

- a) reflects their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language; and
- b) allows them to live with brothers and sisters unless this will not meet their individually assessed needs.

Where the child cannot be matched with a family which reflects their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language, the adoption agency makes every effort to find an alternative suitable family within a realistic time-scale to ensure the child is not left waiting indefinitely in the care system. Where children cannot live

with a family as set out in a) and b) above, a clear explanation will be given to them, having regard to their age and understanding, and be recorded.'

2.1 Considering the child's needs with regard to ethnicity, religion, language and culture:

The Adoption and Children Act Section 1: (5) states that 'In placing the child for adoption, the adoption agency must give due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background.'

Guidance Ch.2:

12 AAR13 requires the agency – so far as is reasonable practicable – to: ascertain the child's wishes and feelings regarding . . . his religious and cultural upbringing.

21 AAR 14 In establishing the wishes and feelings of the parent, guardian or any other person the agency considers relevant, the agency is required – so far as is reasonably practicable – to ascertain their views about . . . placement of the child for adoption and his adoption, including any wishes and feelings about the child's religious and cultural upbringing.

The first choice for a child requiring adoption will be a family which reflects his or her ethnicity, religion, language and culture. To promote self-esteem, and because of the effects of discrimination, it is particularly important that children who are of an ethnic minority heritage grow up with adults who can help them develop a positive sense of their identity. The child's social worker and family finder should consider attending the 'Black Cases' panel for a consultation on how best to meet the needs of such children.

See also LAC 15 Policy 'Meeting the Racial, Religious, Language and Cultural Needs of Looked After Children'.

It is only in exceptional circumstances that a family will be chosen which does not closely match the child's ethnicity, culture or language. These exceptional circumstances may include:

- local and national searches have failed to locate a suitable match within a time-scale indicated by Adoption Panel;
- where the make-up of a sibling group is complex and likely to preclude all culturally and ethnically available adopters;
- where the child has a significant disability and searches locally and nationally have failed to identify a family which can meet the totality of the child's needs;
- the multi-ethnicity of the child cannot be closely replicated.

Occasionally, it may be appropriate to begin an immediate search for a family which may not exactly meet the child's ethnicity, language or culture when experience has already indicated that delay would otherwise be caused. The reasons for this approach must be carefully recorded.

Where, after an agreed time-scale, a compromise is made to seek a family who do not closely match the child's ethnicity, language or culture, it is essential to secure a family who appear to be able to meet the child's other needs **AND** can meet the following attributes:

- acknowledge and value the child as they are and will be
- challenge racism, and exclusion from the relevant minority ethnic grouping
- surround the child with the relevant minority ethnic and mixed parentage families
- enable child to value and be embedded in lifestyles appropriate to both (all) traditions including religion, culture and language
- enable the child to feel comfortable with all their heritage
- enable the child to remain connected with their birth family (if possible and while buffering from racism and abuse)
- provide space and support for the child to develop their way of being of a different ethnicity from one or both of their parents
- live in an area with high numbers of minority ethnic families who reflect the child's ethnicity.

(Adapted from a paper by Beverley Prevatt Goldstein).

2.2 Considering the child's needs with regard to placement with siblings:

In taking complex decisions about whether or not to place siblings together, it is essential to consider:

- each individual child within the group (profile and needs),
- their relationship with each other,
- the dynamics of the group.

'Patterns and Outcomes in Child Placement' HMSO 1991 contains a helpful pro forma for assessing the quality of sibling relationships.

3 External Family Finding

A placement with an in-house family should always be the first consideration for the following reasons:

- the child will be remaining within their own geographical culture;
- appropriate long-term contact will be more easily facilitated;
- there are fewer risks during Introductions, and less time pressure;

- the adoptive family is already known to the Agency, and support can be offered by familiar professionals;
- research indicates that there are more risks inherent in long-distance placements;
- there are large financial implications in purchasing external families.

However, it is appropriate to consider external families when it is clear that there are no local resources available to meet the specific needs of a child or children.

These specific needs may include:

- religion, culture, ethnicity and language;
- remaining in a sibling group;
- a physical or learning disability;
- age or attachment or behavioural difficulties.

INFORMING AND CONSULTING WITH PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

This practice guidance sets out the principles to be discussed with prospective adopters where the issue of the change of a child's first name has been raised.

CHANGE OF CHILD'S FIRST NAME(S)

Prospective adopters may wish to change the first name(s) of a child for whom they are being considered. They are not legally entitled to change the fore-names of the child until the Adoption Order is made. There should be careful discussion with them about whether this will be in the long-term interests of the child.

Prospective adopters, birth parents and the local authority share Parental Responsibility until the making of the Adoption Order, with the discretion of how this is to be shared being held by the authority. Any agreements about the necessity to change a child's first name prior to the making of an Adoption Order must be explained in the Adoption Placement Report. Panel may wish to advise on the matter when considering the proposed placement.

The reasons for prospective adopters wishing to change the first name of a child include:

- the child is starting a new life and the name they have is associated with the past,
- they wish to choose 'their' child's name, as most parents do,
- they may not like the child's name,
- the name might sound clumsy with their surname,
- an unusual name might lead to identification of the placement of the child,
- cultural differences might make the child too different or identifiable,
- there may be religious reasons for giving a child a particular name.

The prospective adopters must be encouraged to consider the following reasons for not changing a child's name:

- a child's name is very much part of their identity, and is known by the child from a very young age. The older a child is, the more a change of name will confuse the child's sense of identity;
- the name is one of the few things the birth parents have given to the children and it may carry some significance;
- if a reunion takes place between a birth relative and adoptee some years later, it will be hard for the relatives to think of the child with a different name from the one they have been using over the intervening years;
- it will be difficult for the adoptee to have an integrated sense of their identity if they have different names at these two different stages of their lives.

Prospective adopters must be encouraged to consider the good, child-centred reasons for not changing a child's name. There may be exceptional circumstances when it would be acceptable to consider a change of name and all aspects of these should be discussed with the prospective adopters. If there do not appear to be clear

child-centred reasons to change the name, it may be that a different placement should be considered.

INFORMING AND CONSULTING WITH PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS:

PREPARATION BY THE PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS FOR THE PROPOSED PLACEMENT:

The prospective adopters' worker should ensure that they are aware of the need to prepare themselves for the proposed placement.

Topics for preparation should include:

- answering any questions the adopter/s may have about the proposed placement including any thoughts and feelings they may have about this,
- actions or decisions that may be needed in relation to the health needs of the children,
- actions or decisions that may be needed in relation to the educational needs of the children,
- how visits of introduction with the child/ren may be conducted,
- how visits to the child/ren's current carers may be conducted,
- a tentative idea of the proposed timescales for introductions, overnight stays and finally moving in,
- considering what might be important for the child/ren to bring with them from their current placement,
- considering any plans that might be made for the child/ren to say 'goodbye' to birth parents/relatives,
- identifying any plans that might be made for the prospective adopters to meet the birth parents,
- identifying and discussing any plans the agency may have for restricting the parental responsibility of the prospective adopter/s during the adoptive placement prior to the Adoption Order being made
- the progress of any ongoing Life Work and how the child is being prepared for the possible placement.

The adopter's social worker should ensure that the family are preparing themselves for the likely placement by thinking about the equipment they are likely to need for the age and type of child they are considering, though not purchasing expensive items until the proposed placement is approved. They may need to finish preparing a bedroom and any safety measures to the house and garden.

They will also need to be making tentative arrangements concerning their employment, to ensure full availability for Introductions, and for one carer to be taking Adoption Leave or equivalent arrangements for full-time care of the child.

PLANNING THE PLACEMENT

This guidance sets out the detailed principles and practice underlying the introductions of a child to the prospective adopters.

INTRODUCTIONS

Planning the timing and outline of Introductions

The detailed planning of introductions takes place during the Placement Planning Meeting and is recorded on the Adoption Placement Plan.

Any time constraints during the Introductions period should be identified, as well as the routine of the child around which the timing will be planned. The details of the planned Introductions will be recorded on an 'Introductions Diary Sheet' with each person completing their own copy. One of the social workers can complete a 'Master copy' to be photocopied and circulated at the end of the Meeting.

Review of Introductions.

It is essential that Introductions should proceed at the child's pace, and so they may need to be slowed down, or quickened, according to how the child is responding. During their progress, therefore, a review is essential, to share observations of the child and to confirm or alter a date for a move. For the very young child, the review may just be necessary to confirm the anticipated moving day. For the older child, it may be necessary to plan for more than one review, and only to set the moving date at the final review. It is essential that the child's and family's social workers have remained in close communication with the adopters, foster carer and child, to have the most up-to-date view of the progress of the Introductions prior to the review.

The Review must be attended by the child's social worker, the adopters and their worker and the foster carer. If the Introductions are proceeding in a satisfactory way, with no identified special risk factors, one of the workers present may chair the meeting and must take minutes. If the Introductions contain greater risk factors (such as an older child being placed, a sibling group, a long-distance placement) the review should be chaired by the same person who chaired the original meeting, and one or more of the other workers involved in the first meeting should be included.

First Meeting between child and adoptive family

It is considered helpful for the adopters to have had their first meeting with the child (or children) they are hoping to adopt shortly before they enter into detailed plans for the introductions period and placement. The purpose of this initial meeting with the child is for the adopters to gain an initial sense of the real child, to ensure they wish to proceed in building up a relationship. However, there may be instances when it is in the interests of the child or prospective adopters for this meeting to take place after the Placement Planning Meeting – for example, when inter-agency prospective adopters who will need to stay locally need to know the dates in order to arrange to be away from home.

The foster home is the most appropriate venue for this meeting as this is where the child is most likely to feel secure. The time of day should be determined by when the child is most responsive and when there are unlikely to be comings and goings in the

foster home. This visit should not be a 'blind sighting'; the child should be appropriately prepared for the visit of adult(s) who are coming to see if they can be the right family for the child.

As well as adopters and child, the main foster carer and one social worker should be present. Usually, this would be the child's social worker, but could be the adopters' social worker if they know the child and foster carers well. Although the worker stays very much in the background, their presence is valuable to observe the initial interaction between child and adopters, especially if there are difficulties in the early stages of the relationship.

Any children of the adoptive family should not be present at this first meeting as the adopters need to explore their own feelings and reactions before they consider those of their children.

This meeting should not last too long as it is about initial impressions, not building up a relationship. For the under-fives, it should be no longer than an hour, with a little more time for older children or sibling groups. The time should not be extended simply because adopters have travelled a long distance. If all is going well during the meeting and the child seems to be confident with the adopters, they can be left on their own for a few minutes.

It is not necessarily helpful for the adopters to take the child a present on this first meeting, as this may become the attraction for future visits.

Following their visit, the adopters are asked to allow themselves till the next day to reflect on whether they wish to proceed to become parents of this particular child. It is important they do not feel pressured to make a decision quickly, or to communicate that decision to anyone else. If an adopter has serious doubts, they need to discuss these with their worker and to decide whether they need to visit the child again. If they do not feel able to proceed, they need to know that this will not necessarily preclude them from being considered for another child at a later stage. However, they will need to consider carefully why this was not the right match, and will need some time to grieve the loss of this child as potentially theirs.

The Tasks of the period of Introductions

- to enable the child and adopters to begin to develop a relationship. Whilst a relationship cannot be fully established during the Introductions, there should be evidence that the child enjoys the company of the adopters and feels safe with them.
- For the child to begin to get a sense of what it is like to live with the adopters, their expectations, way of life, roles, and rules, interests, how they have fun, how they express feelings, affection and disapproval.
- For the adopters to begin to get a sense of what it is like to live with the child.
- For the adopters to become familiar with the child and feel reasonably confident in their handling of them. This will include: routines (meals, baths, bed), handling, behaviours, discipline, play, how the child expresses feelings.
- For any existing children of the adopters to begin to build up a relationship with the child; for them to express their feelings and continue to receive preparation for the arrival of the new sibling.

- For the foster carers to share full information about the child. This will include: routines, behaviours and strategies for handling these, likes and dislikes, health and developmental needs, background and birth family and likely pace of attachment.
- For the child to see and hear the adopters and foster carers sharing full information about him/her – the good and not-so-good so that there is no need to hide feelings or behaviours. If the child thinks everyone knows and accepts everything, they are relieved of the fear of saying or doing the wrong thing.
- To provide adequate opportunity for the child to express feelings about the adopters and the move. This may be with the social worker, foster carers or other adult significant to the child. The child may need to express grief and maybe anger over the separation from the foster family.
- To provide adequate time for the adopters to reflect, talk together and discuss their feelings with their worker; and to receive support.
- Opportunity for the foster carers to share with their child's social worker their observations/hopes/concerns of the child and the interaction with the adopters.
- Opportunity for the foster carers to share their own feelings with their supervising social worker, and for them and their family to receive support.
- To provide a pace which allows all participants time for reflection and relaxation.
- Adequate opportunity for the child's social worker to observe the interaction between child and adopters.
- To provide children and adoptive families of minority ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds adequate time to begin to learn about each other's identity and way of life. This will be especially relevant for children who have been fostered by carers who do not reflect their ethnicity, culture or religion or for some reason are being placed with adopters who do not match their heritage. Even where a placement of similar heritage has been achieved, careful preparation of both the child and the adopters is needed as there may be subtle differences in practices or traditions, or the child may have a confused sense of identity. Careful thought also needs to be given to the preparation and training of foster carers who may be welcoming into their home adopters of a different ethnicity, culture or religion, or may be helping the child move to a family of a different background.
- In situations where the child has a disability, to allow adequate time for the adopters to learn about the child's specific needs and daily management of the disability, and to ensure the child is sensitively prepared.
- Opportunity for the adopters to meet other significant adults who have information to share (e.g. teachers, health visitor, Community Resource Worker who may have supervised the child in contact with birth relatives).
- Opportunity for other members of the foster family to see where the child is going to be living, and for the foster carers to prepare themselves and their family to say good-bye.
- Opportunity to plan how to maintain any significant existing relationships (e.g. school friends).

N.B. Observation of the child's response, direct work with the child if old enough, and support to the adopters and foster carers underpin the aims of the Introductions. It is essential therefore that the key professionals (the social workers for child and adoptive and foster families) are available during this time. Introductions should not take place if one of these workers is likely to be unavailable. However, to avoid unnecessary delay, it may be possible to identify another worker to offer support.

Process and Timing of Introductions

The timing needs to be sufficient to allow for the tasks of Introductions to be achieved. (See above) No definitive rules can be given for the length of time needed as each child and family is unique, and will vary according to the age and development of the child. Adopters, or other parties involved, may sometimes wish to speed up arrangements; however, it is essential to go at the pace of the child as hurried Introductions often feature as a symptom in later disruption.

General guidelines for the pace of Introductions include:

Pre-verbal children (0-2 approx):

Whilst introductions for babies and toddlers are likely to be briefer and more intensive, it is important not to under-estimate the difficulties of moving very young children who will have already experienced separation and may have experienced abuse, neglect and discontinuity of care. The emotional impact on the adopters of becoming parents to a very young child should not be minimised; guilt, panic or depression may be compounded by beginning to parent a child with attachment difficulties.

For most babies and toddlers, one to two weeks should be sufficient for the Introductions, with intensive contact taking place almost daily. This should begin in the foster home, with the adopters gradually taking over the caring tasks. The child should then be introduced to the adoptive home, initially in the presence of the foster carer, with the opportunity to become familiar with the new surroundings.

Overnight stays with the subsequent return to the foster home are confusing for the very young child, and therefore not appropriate. For the pre-verbal child, continuity of sensory experience can assist in the transition, and therefore everything possible should be done to provide the same routines, food, smells and sounds, for example, by keeping the same bedding, clothing and toiletries.

2+ years:

Once children are able to express or listen to ideas and feelings, possibly at a very simple level, the process of Introductions begins to change. Increasingly, they will be able to retain the concept and image of their new family whilst separated from them and therefore daily contact will not be necessary, and an occasional day's break will be beneficial to the child and both families. Such a break can provide space for the child to express their feelings about the potential move.

By the age of approximately 4, an overnight stay may become appropriate, helping the child to allay some fears about the unknown and to understand what moving to a new family will really mean, especially when given the opportunity of talking it through with the foster carer. The older the child is, the more crucial the time allowed for reflection, expression of feelings and on-going preparation becomes. The child's anxieties and misgivings must be listened to, with the pace adjusted accordingly. Potentially more worrying is the child who seems ready to move too quickly, this seeming enthusiasm being very encouraging to the adopters and suggesting the Introductions can be shortened. Such a reaction by the child indicates the need for cautious introductions, and careful preparation and on-going support to both child and adopters after placement.

Siblings:

The Introductions of a sibling group to a new family can be complex, even more so if they cover a wide age span or live in separate foster homes. In the latter situation, it is essential the children have had opportunity to develop their relationships with each other prior to embarking on meeting their new family. Generally, it is advisable to plan according to the needs of the older children, (for example, regarding an overnight stay) as younger ones may have a sense of security from being with an older sibling. There may be benefits of each child having individual time with the adopters. Occasionally, it may be beneficial to place older siblings first so they can develop their relationship with the adopters and then help younger ones to settle.

The needs of children of the adoptive family:

Adequate preparation of birth or adopted children already present in the adoptive family will have been on-going from the time of assessment. During Introductions, it is essential to ensure that they are given time to begin to develop a relationship with their new sibling. Sufficient time and space must also be allowed for them to share with their parents their feelings and any anxieties about the proposed placement, or the pace of Introductions.

It is generally not advisable for children of the adoptive family to accompany their parents to the first meeting with the child, in order to leave their parents free to focus on their own initial reactions and feelings towards the child. A second meeting, involving the children, can take place the next day, and prior to an Introductions Planning Meeting.

Inter-agency placements:

Where the adoptive family lives too far to manage daily travelling for Introductions, local accommodation must be arranged. This is most often self-catering, so that the adopters have a base to which the child can be taken and routines practised. Such Introductions bring extra strains – the adopters are in an unfamiliar environment and away from informal support networks, whilst the child has to cope with a temporary environment.

It may be most helpful to undertake the Introductions in two consecutive phases, starting with the adopters beginning to get to know the child in the familiar environment of the foster home, and limited use of their accommodation to be alone with the child. Once there are indications that the Introductions are progressing well, the adopters could return home, with the foster carer and child staying in temporary accommodation nearby. The child will thus have opportunity to become familiar with their new home and learn more about the family and community (e.g. visit school if relevant), and the adopters will be in their home environment, with family, friends and social worker available for support.

The child's social worker will have an essential role to play in this phase of the Introductions in visiting the child in the adoptive home to assess the progress of the Introductions. The social worker may also be the key person in supporting the foster carer who will be experiencing all the anxieties inherent in the Introductions process in an unfamiliar environment.

The process of Introductions

The Introductions Plan needs to be conveyed to the child in practical terms which they can understand. These can include: a pictorial representation of the Introductions Calendar to convey the time span and type of contact, and use of maps and toy houses and cars to convey activity and distance. It is essential that the material prepared by the adopters (book, videos) is available to the child all the time.

The first few contacts will normally take place in the foster home, with a gradual move away, such as a walk to a nearby park, as the child becomes more confident with the adopters. The foster carer must accompany the child to the adoptive home on at least the first 2 visits, with the adopters taking the child in their car only when the child seems ready. The adopters will need to spend time with the child in the foster home at all significant times of the day and evening, to learn about routines and likes and dislikes, and to practice handling and management of behaviour.

The child can be helped to understand the significance of the move, once they appear to be feeling confident with the adopters, by beginning to take toys and possessions to leave in the adoptive home. They and the adopters can choose together items such as bedding or a suitcase in which clothes and belongings can be packed for the move.

The introduction to the adoptive home should convey a sense of routine and normality, and not consist mainly of treats or outings which will not be routine after placement. Adopters should avoid introducing all but the most significant relatives and friends in the early days as this may be confusing and overwhelming for the child.

Time needs to be allowed towards the end of the Introductions process for the child to say 'goodbyes', for example, to school or nursery, friends and significant relatives of the foster family. A goodbye party, shortly before the move, organised by the foster carers will help the child understand the significance of the move, and reinforce the feeling of having been a valued member of the foster family who will be missed.

Time may be allowed for a visit by members of the foster family and others of significance to the child (e.g. a school friend) to the adoptive home. This may reassure the child that important people from the past know of their whereabouts. It may also help members of the foster family, especially other foster children, or children of the foster carers, to 'let go' and have an understanding of what has happened to the child.

Adequate support must be given by the social workers to the parties involved in the Introductions. Adopters needs ample opportunity to talk to their worker about how they feel things are going, and to be given permission to express any doubts they may be having about the child. The child needs to be visited by their social worker in both the adoptive and foster homes, in order to have a sense of continuity about the person who is seen to be responsible for the plans, and for opportunity to express feelings about the move.

The role of foster carers during Introductions is crucial to their success, and support will be required from their worker. Carers need to give a child a clear message that they are allowed to become close to their new family; this will be more difficult if the

carers have doubts about the rightness of the chosen adopters, or had some desire to keep the child themselves. Adequate recognition of these feelings must be given at an early stage, and ongoing support ensured. The foster family will also need support in dealing with the range of feelings and behaviours the child may present during Introductions and their observations of the child's reaction to the new family and readiness for a move will be invaluable.

For the child who has begun to attend school or nursery, it is essential opportunity is given for a visit to the new school during the Introductions. However, it may be to the child's advantage during the intensity of introductions and for a short settling-in period afterwards, to take some time out of school and to commence gradually at the new school.

During the Introductions period, or shortly afterwards, the foster carers should complete their contribution to the child's Life Book. This will include photos of the child taken over the period spent in the foster home; one or two can show the child 'not at their best' to reinforce the message that they do not have to be perfect to be loved. Photos, with names, of significant members of the foster family and friends should also be included so that the adoptive parents have the information necessary for the child's sense of continuity.

When the Introductions are planned, it is important to discuss what contact will take place between the foster carers and the child in the early days after the move. Such contact helps to reassure and settle the child in the new home. Telephone contact can be already established during the Introductions, which can then be maintained after placement, at a level appropriate to the age of the child.

It is also important to recognise that, as the adopters develop their relationship with the child, they may feel threatened by the apparently strong bond the child had with the foster family, and these feelings need to be recognised when discussing ongoing contact. The adopters need to know they are in control of the time and type of contact. In order that the child may receive reassurance that the foster family still exist, and know where they are, it can be helpful for the foster family to visit the child a few weeks after placement, and for a return visit to be made some months later.

Medical examination: There is no statutory requirement for a child to be medically examined prior to a move to an adoptive family. If such a medical was due shortly before the move, it may be helpful for the adopters to be involved in this. If the child has any specific health or developmental needs, these should have been discussed fully with the adopters at an earlier stage, and the opportunity offered to meet with the Agency Medical Adviser or relevant specialist.

Concerns or difficulties during Introductions

Occasionally, difficulties may arise during the Introductions. These may include:

- the adopters having concerns that they are not taking to, or may not be able to meet the needs of, the child;
- the child not responding to the prospective adopters;
- one or more of the parties may have concerns about the progress of the Introductions; for example, the foster carer may feel the prospective adopters are not responding appropriately to the child.

During all Introductions, it is essential that the child's, family's and foster carer's social workers maintain a regular dialogue with the respective parties they are supporting and that there should be sufficient visits of observation by the child's social worker so that first hand knowledge of developments is obtained. All expectations of what is expected of the prospective adopter's during Introductions must also have been explained very clearly prior to their commencement.

Any anxieties felt by the prospective adopters or foster carers must be shared as soon as possible with their respective workers or the child's social worker. The workers must then discuss these concerns, or any they have themselves, with their respective managers and with each other. These discussions should result in a plan about how and when the concerns will be shared with the relevant party or parties, or the immediate calling of a meeting to share more fully the concerns and plan a course of action. The prospective adopters or foster carers must be notified as quickly as possible about any concerns which relate to them.

If problems persist, a decision should be reached by the social workers in consultation with their managers to halt the Introductions. The reasons should be immediately conveyed to the prospective adopters, followed by a written explanation. The prospective adopters will be entitled to make representations to an Adoption Team Manager and these must be responded to without delay. They may also use the Council's Comments and Complaints service if they feel the Department's policies and procedures have not been followed.

The Move

The Review of Introductions will confirm the date and manner of the move and co-operation between the adopters and carers is essential on this day. It can be very helpful to the child to see the adopters and carer finishing the packing together, giving the message that everyone is in agreement with the move. Because of the emotions involved, carers and adopters often prefer the move to take place quickly and early in the day. The question of the presence of the child's social worker at the move should be determined by the needs of the child and the quality of the relationship between adopters and foster carers. Whilst many foster carers will not wish to distress the child by too strong an expression of their own sadness at the child moving, it is important for them not to hide their feelings and tears, as this reassures the child of their own worth, that they will be missed, and also gives them the permission to express their feelings.

THE PLACEMENT: Principles to consider when setting up a letterbox arrangement

Introduction

It is well accepted that the greater the degree of openness that can be achieved in adoption arrangements, the greater the chance of the adopted person enjoying health and happiness in the long term. The Letterbox Service plays a vital role in this process.

It is important that agreed indirect contact arrangements between birth and adoptive families are competently, consistently and efficiently managed. It is vital that letters etc do not go astray and are treated with appropriate attention to confidentiality by staff working within the adoption setting.

Rationale for the Scheme

The existence of the Letterbox scheme is a reminder that adoption is not a one off event but a lifelong process. Adjustments may be required as the needs of the children involved change. Where adjustments are required, any party (the child/young person, adoptive parents, birth relatives) may request a review of the arrangements.

Ongoing contact may:

- Enable a child to develop a realistic understanding of the circumstances of separation.
- Maintain a flow of communication, which could facilitate future contact.
- Keep the communication channels open should there be a need for direct information, e.g. the death of a relative, or new medical information.
- Enable a child to be reassured about the well being of family members and friends and for the birth relatives to receive such assurance.
- Assist a child to construct a full sense of identity.
- Enable a sense of reality to replace fantasies.
- Help valuable relationships to be maintained.
- Help a birth relative in grieving.
- Help a child to move on and develop new attachments with parental blessing.
- The exchange of letters indicates acceptance of the birth family by the adopters, which is very important to the child.
- It also indicates that the child is loved and valued by the birth family.

Principles

- An outline of the child's needs in relation to contact with birth relatives and significant others should be an element of any Care Plan which is recommending that adoption will be the plan. These contact proposals will be included in the Child's Permanence Report. At the stage of making a recommendation that a child should be placed for adoption, the Panel must consider and give advice about arrangements which the agency proposes to make for allowing any person contact with the child. At the proposed placement stage, when Panel makes a recommendation as to whether a child

should be placed for adoption with a particular adopter, Panel must consider and may give advice about proposed contact with any person.

- Any discussion concerning the type (direct/indirect, frequency etc) of contact will be based on an assessment of the quality of the relationship between the child and the person with whom it is proposed there will be contact.
- When a Placement Order is made or at any time up to the making of an Adoption Order a Court may have made a Section 26 Contact Order in relation to any contact, direct or indirect. This cannot be altered without the agreement of all parties involved or referring the matter back to court.
- A Letterbox arrangement may be set up between the adoptive parents on behalf of the child and a birth parent or guardian or any other relative or with any other person the agency considers relevant. For the purposes of this procedure, the latter group (birth parent or guardian or any other relative or with any other person the agency considers relevant) will be referred to as 'birth relative'.
- There is an expectation that unless there are very good reasons to the contrary, the majority of Letterbox arrangements will be two way. Reasons why this is not the case should be documented on the child's Adoption Case Record so that this information will be available to the adoptive person if requested.
- When planning contact for a child for whom adoption is the plan, the importance of developing or maintaining contact with birth full or half siblings must be an essential element. The type of contact will need to take into account the circumstances of the siblings, such as whether they live with birth relatives, in foster care or in another adoptive placement. Careful consideration should therefore be given to the implications for each of the parties involved. For example, there will be a range of issues such as confidentiality if an adoptive child were to have contact with a sibling in foster care who sees a birth relative. If a decision is taken not to arrange contact between siblings, reasons should be carefully documented on the Adoption Case Record so that the adopted person has access to this information.
- The proposed contact arrangements and the prospective adopters' agreement to them will be detailed in the Adoption Placement Report and the Adoption Placement Plan. Written information about the principles and working of the Letterbox Service will be shared with the prospective adopters at the appropriate time and the date noted on the child's Adoption Case Record.
- Once birth parents are informed that social workers are recommending adoption as the plan for the child, they should also be given information about the types of contact that might be available to the child. They should then be involved in any further discussions about their wishes and understanding of a Letterbox arrangement. Written information about the principles and working of the Letterbox Service should be shared with the birth relatives at the appropriate time and the date noted on the child's Adoption Case Record. It is essential to recognise that a birth parent's willingness and ability to take

part in such an arrangement will be determined by their process of coming to terms with the loss of the child and subsequent adjustment to the part they will play in the child's life. An assessment of their support needs in undertaking a Letterbox arrangement, for example, in writing a letter, will be required and will be outlined in the Adoption Placement Report. At each stage, they should be reminded of their right to access independent support.

- At any time in considering, setting up and implementing a Letterbox arrangement, the advice of an Adoption Support social worker may be sought.
- If a birth relative and prospective adopters are able to have a face-to-face meeting, this is a valuable opportunity for the two parties to discuss arrangements for Letterbox contact. For example, each party can hear from the other what information they would like to receive. There is often a greater commitment to the arrangement and the task made easier when each party, having discussed the plan face-to-face, is able to visualise the other as a real person.
- A responsive exchange of letters allows each party the opportunity to respond to the latest information sent by the writer. For example, the adoptive parent may send news to the birth relative, and one, two or several months later the birth relative can reply, sending their own news and responding to the information the adopter has sent.
- The timing of the exchange will require particular thought. For example there may be a time of the year which is particularly sensitive for one of the parties.
- For the majority of arrangements, the Adoption Unit will not be involved in screening the letters as the adoptive parents have the responsibility of determining how to share information in a way which meets the best interest of the child. All adopters must be made aware of this and must ensure they screen a letter for inappropriate content before sharing it with the child. If, however, adopters are aware that information might be sent that will not be in the interests of the child and would preclude them from sharing the letter with the child, they may request that an Adoption Support Social Worker opens and screens the letter. The worker will record the date and reasons for the request for screening, the agency response and actions each time something is edited or removed. Material that has not been sent on will be kept on the file for the adopted person to access as an adult. The adopter may also request that the Adoption support worker takes up the matter with the birth relative and gives them advice on appropriate content.
- Adoptive parents, or the social worker if requested to 'screen' the letter, must ensure that the birth relative has not included in the letter their address or other means of enabling the child/young person to make contact with them.
- Where a party receives information which they find difficult to receive or share with the child, they may wish to discuss this with an adoption support worker. The worker may either offer advice in how to deal with this information or offer to contact the sender of the letter with a view to sharing the recipient's

concern. Where appropriate, any of the parties may be referred for counselling to an independent agency.

- If there is a further sibling born to either of the birth parents and Letterbox contact is requested, it is the responsibility of that sibling's social worker to contact the Admin Officer (Adoption Support) to ascertain the current arrangements and request any amendments/additions.
- All correspondence in connection with Letterbox arrangements is dealt with through a Post-box service so that the Unit is not identified. The address (P.O. Box 105, Bradford, BD1 5XA) is stamped on the back of any correspondence sent by the Unit.
- The Letterbox arrangement for the child will end at the age of 18. (See below for exceptions). As part of the Exchange nearest to the child's 16th birthday, a letter will be sent to the adoptive family to remind them that our responsibility to facilitate it will end when the child reaches 18 and that contact with the birth family then becomes the responsibility of the young person. A second letter outlining the above will be sent nearest to the child's 17th birthday. The letter will explain that if the adoptee wishes to make an absolute or qualified Veto, this will be recorded on the Adoption Case Record. The letter will enclose a leaflet for the adoptee giving all this information.
- Letters outlining the same principle will be sent to the other parties involved in the exchange. These will be sent at the time of the exchanges nearest to the child's 16th and 17th birthdays. The letters will explain that if the birth relative who is a party to the exchange wishes to make an Expression of Wish, this will be recorded on the child's Adoption Case Record.
- If the Letterbox arrangement involves an exchange on behalf of more than one sibling in the adoptive family (e.g. between 3 siblings adopted together and their birth mother), it will continue until the youngest reaches 18. However, the older ones have the right to discontinue their involvement if they wish.
- If the Letterbox arrangement involves an exchange between siblings in different adoptive homes, we will continue to facilitate the arrangement until the youngest child involved in the exchange reaches 18, even if that young person is not the party on whose behalf Bradford set up the arrangement.
- If the Letterbox arrangement involves an exchange between an adopted child and a younger sibling who is not adopted (e.g. may be in foster care, or cared for by parent(s) or relatives), the arrangement will end when the adopted child reaches 18. It will be that young person's responsibility to organise contact. However, an Adoption Support social worker or Independent Agency may be able to advise and assist in the negotiations.

THE PLACEMENT: Meeting between adoptive parents and birth parents/relatives

This practice guidance sets out the purpose, procedure and content of a direct meeting between the adoptive parent(s) and a birth parent, relative or other person of particular significance to the child.

It is commonly accepted practice that a meeting may take place between adoptive parents and their child's birth parents or another birth relative, such as a grandparent, aunt or older sibling. They may take place in situations where the child has been voluntarily relinquished for adoption, or where there has been legal action to remove a child. Although the element of a legal contest may add extra stress to such a meeting, experience indicates that there is enough common ground to make such meetings productive.

(i) Purpose:

- Adopters and birth parents can meet to share a common concern for the child.
- Offering the birth parents an opportunity to meet the people who will be bringing up their child, and to share information about the child, is a mark of respect of their feelings and status. It indicates that, even though they may be seen to have 'failed' their child, they still have a positive contribution to make to the child's welfare and progress.
- Having the opportunity to ask the birth parents (or other birth relatives) for information about the child represents another, and first hand, way in which adopters can add to the information they have already been given.
- It can be of immeasurable value to the child as s/he grows up to know that the adoptive parents have met the birth parents and can talk of them with direct experience.
- Any proposed form of contact, including the annual exchange of information via the Letterbox system, can be more meaningful if the parties involved have met each other and have had opportunity to explore together what they would most like to know from each other.

(ii) Timing

A meeting may take place any time from the Introductions period to the making of the Adoption Order, or later if appropriate. A meeting which takes place at a very early stage of introductions or placement may be at the request of a voluntarily relinquishing parent who wishes to gain reassurance from knowing with whom the child is being placed. Or it may be a matter of practicality for adopters who live at a considerable distance and are unlikely to return to the area.

However, experience suggests that a meeting can be most productive when the child has been in placement for some time. This means the adopters can talk about the child in a knowledgeable way and will have had time to reflect on what information they most need. This timing also has the advantage of allowing the adopters space to work through the initial emotional and psychological adjustment in becoming adoptive parents and therefore to have more energy to focus on the meeting.

(iii) Planning:

- Support: Both birth parents and adopters will need someone to assist in their preparation and in attending the meeting. For the adopters, their worker will be in the best position to do this. For the birth parents, they may have the choice of their child's social worker, as this person will know their child and may have helped the adults through the whole process. However, if the birth parents have established a relationship with a member of AAY who is offering them independent support, this may be the most appropriate person to prepare and support them at a meeting. This may be even more applicable if there is strong negative feeling against their child's social worker. Whoever is to be the support, the timing of the meeting should allow for the opportunity for a relationship to be established with the birth parents.
- Venue: Ideally, a meeting should take place in a comfortable, neutral venue where the people involved can feel at ease. Adopters may not be familiar with Social Services offices or Family Centres and there may be unpleasant memories for birth parents of difficult Case Conferences and painful interviews. Comfortable seating, carpets, refreshments, absence of telephones and no intrusions set the scene for the birth parents/relatives coming to feel they are respected and this meeting is different from other formal meetings which may have taken place in planning for the child. Members of the Adoption Team may have examples of appropriate neutral venues.
- Preparation: Adopters and birth parents need opportunity to voice their hopes, fears and fantasies about the meeting, and to prepare adequately for the event. It is helpful for both the workers involved to meet with both parties to help them think about the meeting, what they hope to achieve from it and so that the adopter's worker is not a complete stranger to the birth parents.
- It is of great importance to help the adopters in thinking about range of emotions they may experience before, during and after the meeting. No matter what their anxieties, it is likely they will feel positive about meeting one or both birth parents because they can see the advantages for the child, in being able to talk about having met their birth parent, and for the birth parent who will have been able to receive some reassurance about the people who will be parenting their child. Occasionally however, adopters may experience an unexpected ambivalence about the meeting because a deepening sense of empathy for the birth parents may lead to feeling of guilt that they and not the birth parent are bringing up this child.
- See below for suggested topics and questions. In situations where birth parents do not live together, there may need to be 2 meetings. Thought is needed about basic safeguards:
 - The adopters may feel that they may be able to be traced, for example, from their car being recognised in the future. This can be prevented by their worker taking them to the meeting.
 - Care should be taken to prevent adopters' names being read from a 'signing in' book. Their worker can arrange with the Reception beforehand to sign them in as his/her guests without writing in their names.

- Violence may be a major fear for adopters. A serious risk of violence would suggest a meeting should not take place, but video recordings could take place instead to 'introduce' parties to each other.
- There may be worries that a birth parent might arrive drunk or under the influence of drugs. If preparatory work is done effectively with birth parents, dealing with anxiety via alcohol or drugs may not be as likely. If there is a risk of unpredictable behaviour, including violence, the workers should ensure that a member of staff in the building can be altered.

(iv) Preparation topics:

Birth parents: What is it alright to ask about?
 What is it definitely not alright to ask about?
 Can someone accompany me, such as mum or a friend?
 What/who is the meeting for?
 Can I give the adopters a gift for my child?
 What information would we like to give/receive in the Letterbox exchange?

Adopters: How much do we say about ourselves?
 What names do we give – if any?
 Do we take some photos of the child for the birth parents?
 Do we take some gift from the child for the birth parents (e.g. a drawing)?
 What is the right time for the meeting?
 Do we need to establish ourselves with the child first, or do we need to meet the parents first to clear the way to build a relationship with the child?
 Can we approach the meeting with a positive outlook?
 Should we have a photo taken with the birth parents?
 Would we like a short time alone with the birth parents – without the social workers present?
 What information would we like to give/receive in the Letterbox exchange?
 Would we be happy to send annual photos?
 If we have adapted/changed the child's name in any way, will we explain this?

(v) Questions and topics for the meeting:

Birth Parents: What do adopters think of the child?
 When will they tell the child s/he is adopted?
 What will they tell the child about why s/he is adopted?
 What are the adopters' views about parenting, e.g. strictness, religion?
 Would the adopters support the adoptee in tracing?
 Content of the Letterbox exchange

Adopters: What is the significance of chosen names?
Information about the early care of the child?
Any observed traits or personality?
Other relevant information about relatives/background
Information about birth parents own interests/likes, dislikes
What would birth parents like adoptive parents to share with the child about them?
Content of Letterbox exchange
What the child is like now

(vi) The meeting:

The two workers will have established how and when the birth parents and adopters will arrive, considering who will be in situ first. A preliminary meeting in a waiting area where awkward silences and tension may be increased should be avoided. Some pre-planning of seating arrangements will help workers to establish the right opportunities for eye-contact, as well as providing space where it is needed. The atmosphere is helped if there are drinks immediately available and, after introductions, having something to look at, such as photos of the child, can 'break the ice'. It is helpful at the beginning of the meeting to establish what the boundaries are in terms of time and what is confidential. It is essential for workers to have negotiated their roles and who will deal with different contingencies.

(vii) Debriefing:

Workers need to build in time with birth parents and adopters to evaluate an important meeting. The following comments have come from such discussions:

Adopters:

'I came for the sake of our little girl. I came away feeling a great sympathy for the birth mother, and some feelings for the birth father. I feel in a much stronger position to talk to our daughter as she grows up about her birth parents.'

'When the birth mum cried I did as well and gave her a hug. I felt very close to her.'

'When the birth mum said she liked us, it felt like a seal of approval; that freed us up to bring up her son in our family.'

Birth parents:

'I really liked them. They aren't what I expected. I feel so much better now.'

'She was nervous wasn't she?'

'I liked the way he gave me straight answers and understood how upset I was feeling.'