



BEDFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

In Alliance with



**Adopt East – Bedford
Adoption Agency
Statement of Purpose 2023/24**

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1. Introduction

This Statement of Purpose sets out the principles, values and aims, and objectives of Bedford Borough Council Adoption Agency(Adopt East- Bedford). It contains information about the service, and 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.

Bedford Borough Council is a registered Adoption Agency and is subject to the Adoption Agency Regulations (AAR) 2005 and subsequent amendments (2012).

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 Statement of Purpose fulfils the requirement of Standard 18 of the Adoption Minimum Standards 2011 (Care Standards Act 2000), the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005, Adoption Statutory Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2001 revised July 2014 following the Children and Families Act 2014, the Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012.

3. Aims and Objectives

The Adoption Act 2002 promotes adoption as a permanence option for Children Looked After. 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.

Bedford Borough Council supports the ethos that children and young people are best able to develop close and enduring relationships within a family setting. Bedford Borough Council 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 Bedford Borough 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 - Bedford 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 practices in adoption through the provision of advice and support to 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-centered, 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

Bedford Borough Council Children's Services has a vision that Bedford Borough 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, the Adoption Agency aims to provide services that meet the individual needs of Children Looked After 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 - Bedford will work in partnership with other RAA's, LA's and VAA's 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 - Bedford 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.

5. Management and Organisational Structure

Governance responsibility for Adopt East - Bedford rests with the elected members. The Adoption Agency forms part of Bedford Borough Council's Children's Services directorate. The Directorate is headed by the Director of Children's Services. The Director is supported by the Chief Officer for Children's Services.

The Assistant Director (Chief Officer) is the Responsible Individual and Agency Decision Maker for the Adoption Agency. The Manager (HOS) Corporate Parenting Service, has operational responsibility for the Adoption Agency and is presently the Registered Manager for the Adoption Agency.

The Adoption Team Manager supervises the Adoption Social Workers, Social Work Assistants and Business Support Officers within the Adoption Team.

The Team Manager and Social Work Staff are professionally qualified with commensurate social work experience in relation to permanence planning and adoption. Staff practice is supported via monthly supervision and annual Personal Development Reviews to identify training needs, which inform the Council's own Learning and Development Programme. Specialist external training is commissioned to support learning and development when necessary.

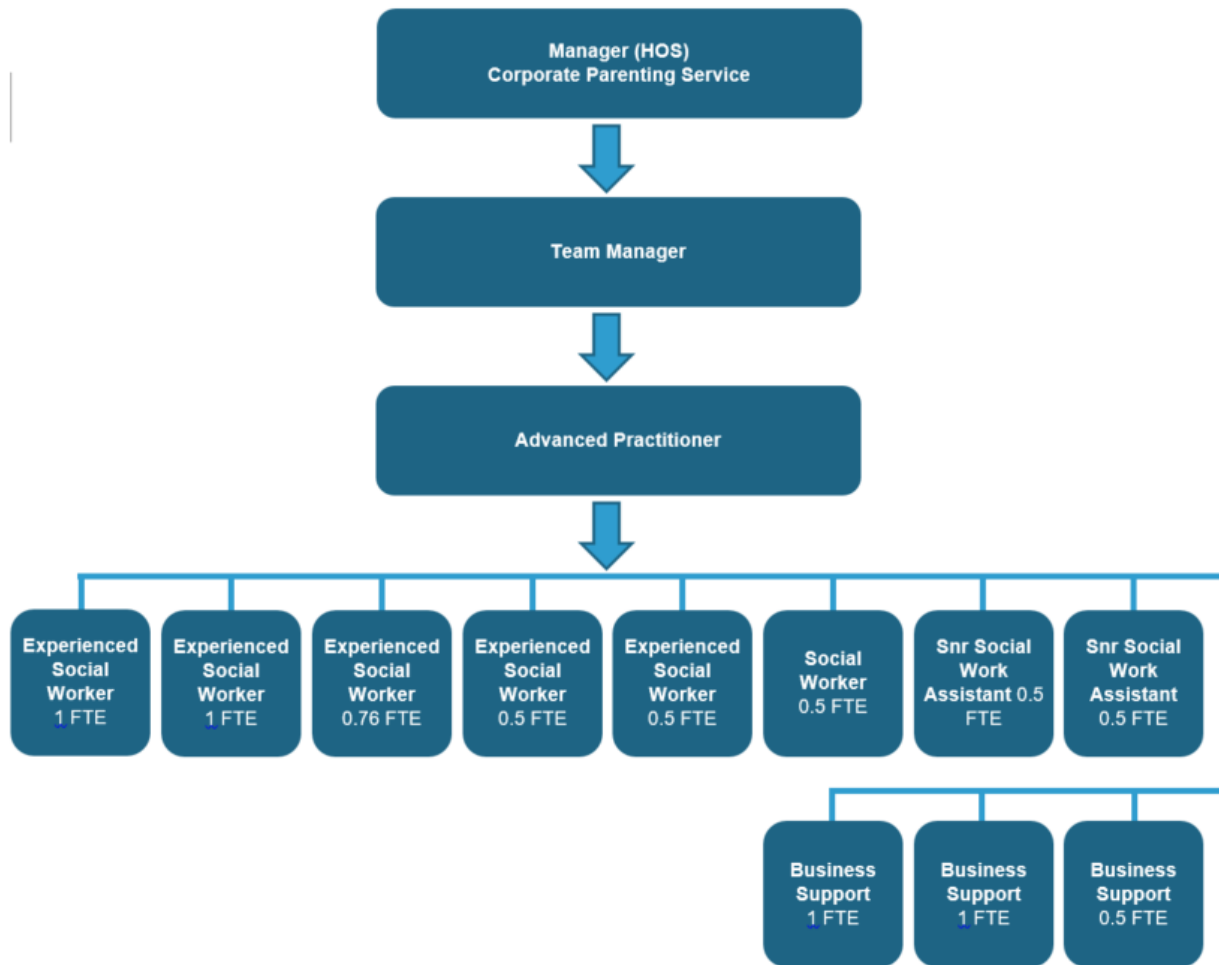
Social workers are supported in their roles by business support officers providing dedicated support in the following areas:

- Letterbox Contact exchange
- Tracking Stage 1 and Stage 2, adoption enquiry and assessment processes
- Management information and tracking
- Processing of ASF administration
- Supporting case progression for children subject to care proceedings.

There is a Marketing and Recruitment Officer responsible for marketing and recruitment of prospective adopters in line with Bedford borough Council's recruitment and sufficiency strategy. This role is shared with the Local Authority's Fostering Service.

The role of the Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA) is undertaken by the Adoption Team Manager.

The service has a shared Adoption Panel, which is hosted by Adoption Connects RAA. An Adoption Panel Adviser and administrators 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.



6. Services Provided by Bedford Adoption Agency (Adopt East – Bedford)

The Adoption Team delivers services that enhance the recruitment, assessment and training of adopters, the speedy and safe placement of children and appropriate follow-on support. Adopt East - Bedford 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.

The Adoption Agency recruit, assess and approve a range of adoptive families in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of Bedford Borough children for whom adoption is the plan including children with harder to place characteristics and sibling groups.

The service undertakes Family Finding activity for Bedford Borough 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 life long 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 Bedford Borough 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 Bedford Borough Council's 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 one working day. Full information packs can be requested and would be sent out within five working days. Information is also available to download from the Bedford Borough Council website, www.bedford.gov.uk about Adoption.

Once an initial enquiry has been completed, prospective adopters will be invited to an Adoption Information Meeting, which are delivered virtually on a 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. Experienced adopters attend these meetings to share their experiences of the adoption process.

Following attendance at the information event, an information pack is immediately sent which includes an expression of interest form. A follow-up call is also provided five days after the event to explore any further queries/questions applicants may have. At this point, if enquirers feel they would like to further explore adoption, they complete and return the expression of interest form to us.

Once the enquirer has returned the expression of interest form, a follow-up call is given to discuss their situation and readiness. If there are no issues arising from the completed expression of interest form and from further discussions and the enquirer would like to proceed to the next stage of the process, they will be sent a registration of interest form (ROI) Once completed and returned, the Business Support Officer will process statutory checks and references. They will also receive a Welcome to Stage one letter and 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 1 within two months, unless there are clear reasons why it needs to take longer, for example, when a statutory check is delayed, or if a prospective adopter needs more time to complete voluntary childcare experience.

Stage One of the process is 'adopter-led', therefore social workers will meet with prospective adopters to complete a Stage One Agreement based on their individual circumstances and learning needs. They will be given a named worker who they can contact for support during this stage of the process. Bedford Borough Adoption Agency endeavours to support prospective adopters 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.

Prospective adopters are offered Preparation Training in Stage One with additional, optional modules in Stage Two and post-approval as appropriate. The training is designed to help prospective adopters to assess their own capacity and motivation to adopt a child by providing information, stimulating discussion and meeting experienced adopters.

Prospective adopters will also be invited to attend an additional training session about Early Permanence Placements. 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. This allows an element of self-selection for prospective adopters who, having completed the Early Permanence training module, are able to decide whether or not early permanence is right for them.

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 linked 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 DBS checks and medicals, are taken up as soon as the ROI is accepted. Applicants are aware that negative police/statutory checks may affect their application and in some cases 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, social media, contacting adult children of the applicant/s and former partners with whom the applicant has jointly parented a child will also be sought.

Adoption Medical

Applicants will be asked to have their Adoption Medical as soon as their ROI 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 taken into account in assessing the applicants' suitability to progress to Stage One alongside other information.

Once all Stage One training is complete and statutory references and checks are returned, the social worker will review these with the manager and the prospective adopters will be invited to attend an end of stage one meeting to discuss their experience of the process to date and whether or not they, and the agency, feel the timing is right for them to progress onto Stage Two.

At this point prospective adopters 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 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 prospective adopter is not suitable to progress to Stage Two Assessment, this will be discussed with the prospective adopter at the End of Stage One Meeting and a written explanation of this decision will also be sent to them.

Stage Two Assessment

If the agency agrees that the prospective adopters can proceed 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 that the assessing social worker or manager believes 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 in writing to Panel. If the Panel recommends that the application should not be completed, and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is subsequently 'minded' to decide 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 to 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 that will be final.

Applicants see their Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) and may contribute to it/correct it 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 are 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 daycare for a working parent) they will be interviewed. Family members or friends who may regularly provide back-up care will have a DBS check.

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 generally 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. One of these should be a family member who may be different from the family member referred to above. In the case of applicants who are couples, it is our policy to interview a representative from each side of the family. 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. Interviews with referees are confidential and referees should be assured that we will treat them as such.

Second Time Applicants

Second time applicants may be eligible for a fast track process, depending on 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 initial visit to explore their current circumstances and the timing of their enquiry.

Following the initial visit, the social worker will write up a report of the visit indicating if they recommend that the enquirer is invited on to Stage One. This will then be passed to the Team Manager for approval within 5 working days. A copy of this report and recommendation will be sent to the prospective adopter 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 initial 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 makes a recommendation in relation to the applicants' suitability to be approved as 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 via the Independent Review Mechanism. .

Once the Agency Decision Maker has made a decision in respect of the prospective adopters' 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

For those adopters who feel it is appropriate, 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. This process will be discussed with adopters during their Stage Two Assessment and again at the point that an Early Permanence Placement is identified.

Review of Approved Adopters

The adoption team aim to match approved adopters and children at the earliest opportunity, working proactively with 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 an adopter being approved and a child being placed. In the first instance, children who are looked after and have a plan of adoption from Bedford Borough will be considered for placements with Bedford Borough adopters, but if no suitable match is available for the child, placements from other agencies within the Adopt East Regional Adoption Alliance will be actively considered. If no suitable placement can be identified within the region then in line with the national priority for children not to be left waiting when they could be matched with a suitable adopter albeit from another geographical area, agreement will be sought from the Head of Adopt East to search nationally for an appropriate match.

As part of the Adopt East Alliance, waiting 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 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 applicants' 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 and adopters do not agree with this recommendation, they will be provided with a copy of the report and will be able to add their comments to it. This will then be presented to the Adoption Panel, which adopters will be invited to attend. As with the original approval process, the Panel will make a recommendation regarding the adopters' continued suitability which will then be considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). If the 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 is 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 or inter alliance match is available e.g. attendance at activity days, exchange days and referral to Linkmaker.

The same matching practice and process will apply to families being considered either from the internal Bedford Borough pool of adopters or interagency placements, and decisions regarding the progression of matches will be based upon the ability of adopters to meet the assessed needs of the child which will be recorded and evidenced via a matching meeting held between the child's social worker, adoption social worker and family finding social worker chaired by the adoption team manager.

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, and 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, and have the opportunity to meet the child as a '*friend*' of the current carer, known as a Chemistry Visit. This allows prospective

adopters the opportunity to get to know the child without the pressure of being introduced as the new parent. Child Appreciation Days will also be convened for children aged 3 years and over.

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.

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 group/ings and ongoing contact planning.

Any plans for post adoption 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 contact plans will be discussed with prospective adopters as part of the matching process.

Proposed matches between 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 Bedford Borough Council's Agency Decision Maker. The role of the Agency Decision Maker is undertaken by Harmesh Bhogal, Chief Officer for Children's Services.

The Adoption Panel Advisers, 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 Panel Advisers ensure 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

Bedford Borough Council 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. A monthly Adoption Tracking Meeting is held which enables the service to identify those children that are hard to place and to consider best options available for securing adoptive placements in a timely manner. Permanence planning meetings for children who are identified as having a parallel plan of adoption are co-ordinated by a family finding social worker from the adoption team.

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

When considering a particular adoptive placement for a child, the Adoption Agency 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 introducing 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 and foster carer will work together to prepare children in an age appropriate manner and may include use of the Bedford Borough Council Children's Guide to Adoption, story books about adoption, direct work activities to ascertain the child's wishes and feelings.

Once a match has been identified, presented to the Adoption Panel for consideration, and agreed by the ADM, a family book will be provided to the child to begin the introduction 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 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 Bedford Borough Council's policy and procedure and statutory guidance. These are provided by the child's social worker. 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 the 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. A leaflet providing guidance for adopters regarding the use of the Life Story Book and sharing of the Later Life Letter has been developed and is provided to adopters with the books and letters.

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 also be involved in supervising and supporting the child in placement.

Children placed for adoption by Bedford Borough Council 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 Adoption placements. 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 reflection and learning (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, Bedford Borough Council 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 worker 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 recorded.
- 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 CAFCASS), 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 contact 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 in the child's file and Adoption Case Record

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 contact 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 Support Fund as appropriate following an assessment of their adoption support needs

Bedford Borough Council's Adoption Agency recognises the importance of supporting adopters and their families to access a wide range of support provisions, to ensure placement stability, and to help secure positive lifelong outcomes for the child.

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. 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 Support Fund

On the 1st of May 2015, the government launched the Adoption Support Fund (ASF). 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 an 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.

In order to access the fund, families will need to have an assessment of their adoption support needs to be 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. 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.

In 2016, the Adoption Support Fund was widened to include access to support for SGO carers and their children. In 2022 children and young people who are under a residency order or child arrangement order (CAO) and were previously looked also became eligible for the fund, as did children who were previously looked after but where the adoption, special guardianship, residency or CAO placement has broken down, irrespective of any reconciliation plans.

The Adopt East - Bedford are responsible for undertaking assessments of adoption support needs pre and post order, and families and other professionals are able to refer to the service to request such an assessment by contacting the Adoption Duty Social Worker on 01234 718718.

15. 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.

Bedford Borough 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 duration of up to three years following granting of the Order for families who live outside of Bedford Borough. After three years, the Local Authority where the family reside are responsible for the provision of needs assessments and services.

16. Complaints

Bedford Borough Council has a statutory Children's Social Care Complaints Procedure for complaints raised by, or on behalf of, young people. The three stage process is based on The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006. For complaints that relate to the treatment of those other than the young person (e.g. the parents) or are raised by those without sufficient interest in the young person, the Council has a two-stage Corporate Complaints Procedure. Information about the complaints procedure can be found at www.bedford.gov.uk/beheard

In addition, there is a corporate complaint/feedback mechanism that is available for people to use if they believe the standard of service falls short of what you would expect, or if a member of staff does not do what they said they will. Complaints will be acknowledged within three working days of receipt.

Details of how the Council proposes to handle your complaint including details of who will respond to the complaint and by when will be provided.

Our complaints process has two stages: service resolution and senior-level investigation.

Stage One – Service Resolution

Most complaints will be managed at this stage of the process. You will normally receive a written response within ten working days from the date the full details of complaint are received. If the complaint is complex it may take up to twenty working days. If this is not possible, we will explain why and provide you with another date by when you can expect to receive a response.

Your response will:

- Include the outcome of the Stage One investigation
- Advise you if the complaint has been upheld or not and the reasons why
- Inform you of your right to request a Senior Level Investigation (Stage Two) where appropriate

If you are not happy with the response to your complaint, Customer Relations may offer you a meeting with a manager to try and sort things out. This does not stop you from asking your complaint to be considered at Stage Two if you so wish.

Stage 2 - Senior Level Investigation

If you remain unhappy with the response you receive at Stage One you can request a Stage Two investigation.

You will need to state the following:

- What issues of complaint you are unhappy with
- The reason why you remain unhappy
- What you are expecting from the Stage Two investigation

We would normally expect to receive a request for Stage Two within 28 days of the Stage One response being sent to you. Your complaint will be allocated to a senior manager and you will receive an acknowledgment letter, setting out who will respond to your complaint and when you can expect a written response.

Your response will include:

- The outcome of the Stage Two investigation
- Advise you if the complaint has been upheld or not and the reason why
- Inform you of your right to appeal to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

We will aim to send you a response within 25 working days from the date the Stage Two request is received. If this is not possible, we will explain why and provide you with another date by when you can expect to receive a response.

If a complaint is deemed serious enough then the complaint can be started at Stage Two. This will ensure that it is responded to by a suitably senior member of staff and that enough time can be allocated for the investigation.

Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

If you have been through all stages of our complaints procedure and are still unhappy, you can ask the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to review your complaint. The Ombudsman investigates complaints in a fair and independent way, and is a free service.

The Ombudsman expects you to have given us chance to deal with your complaint, before you contact them. If you have not heard from us within a reasonable time, it may decide to look into your complaint anyway. This is usually up to twelve weeks but can be longer for social care complaints that follow a statutory process.

About the Ombudsman

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman is the final stage for complaints about councils and some other organisations providing local public services. It also investigates complaints about all adult social care providers (including care homes and home care agencies) for people who self-fund their care.

Information about the complaints procedure can be found at www.bedford.gov.uk/beheard

17. 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 Bedford Borough Council's procedures for managing allegations regarding such children.

18. 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 Manager (HOS) Corporate Parenting Service and the Team Manager for Adoption. Any changes to the document will be formally approved by the Director of Children's Services and the Executive Member for Children's Services and will be notified to the Registration Authority within 28 days.

This Statement of Purpose will next be reviewed in April 2024.

19. 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

20. Contacts

For more information about Adopt East- Bedford, Adoption Service please contact:

The Adoption Team
Bedford Borough Council
Borough Hall
Cauldwell Street
Bedford
MK42 9AP
Tel: 01234 718718
Email: adoptionandfostering@bedford.gov.uk
Web Address: www.bedford.gov.uk