

Essex Adoption Service Policy Statement October 2010



Contents

Introduction

Values and Aims

Children

Birth Families

Adopters

 Agency Adoption

 Inter-Country Adoption

 Non-Agency Adoption

Post Adoption

General Duties

Reviewing the Adoption Service Policy Statement

Introduction

The Essex Adoption Service Policy Statement complements the:

- Statement of Purpose (2010) which sets out the overarching aims and objectives for the Essex Adoption Service. It also describes how the Adoption Service is organised.
- Essex Adoption Service Plan which sets specific annual objectives and analyses performance for the preceding year.

Values and Aims

The Adoption Regulations and Adoption National Minimum Standards form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 for the conduct of adoption agencies and adoption support agencies. They can be used by children, birth families, prospective/adoptive parents and adopted adults as a guide to what they can expect from an adoption agency and adoption support agency.

Values of the Essex Adoption Service:

The values statement below explains the important principles which underpin these Standards. Essex fully endorses these values:

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their developmental needs during childhood and beyond. Where possible this should be with their birth family, but where this is not consistent with their welfare every effort will be made to secure an alternative stable home where the child will feel loved and valued.
- Adopted children deserve the best experiences in life, from excellent parenting and education to a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents, skills and interests, in order to have an enjoyable childhood and successful adult life. Stable placements, emotional wellbeing and support are essential elements of this success.
- The child's welfare, safety and needs will be at the centre of the adoption process.
- Children's wishes and feelings are important and will be actively sought and fully taken into account at all stages.
- A sense of identity is important to a child's well being. To help children develop this, their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language is fully recognised and positively valued and promoted.
- Disabled children and children with complex needs may have particular needs which should be fully recognised and taken into account.
- Delays in making decisions and in placing children with a family who can meet their developmental needs can have a severe impact on the health and development of children and should be avoided where possible.

- Where a child cannot be cared for in a suitable manner in his or her own country, intercountry adoption may be considered as an alternative means of providing a permanent family.
- Safeguards and standards applied to intercountry adoption are in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 and the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption 1993.
- Children, birth parents/guardians and families and adoptive parents and families will be valued and respected.
- A genuine partnership between all those involved in adoption is essential for the National Minimum Standards to deliver the best outcomes for children; this includes the Government, local government, other statutory agencies, VAAs and ASAs.

The Essex Adoption Service adheres to the principle of providing an efficient Adoption Service that works within current legislation, the budget set by Essex County Council and the Corporate Plan, which puts the people of Essex at the heart of its services. The Budget and Corporate Plan 2010-11 states:

“We believe that all children have the potential to make a success of their lives and that all efforts should be made to make sure that disadvantaged children are able to fully participate in society. Looked after children are more likely to suffer mental health problems and under-achieve at school. It is one of the key duties of a council to make sure that these children are protected and can enjoy their childhood.”

Aims of the Essex Adoption Service:

- To place children with prospective adopters who best meet their assessed needs within the timescales laid down by the National Minimum Standards
- To recruit, assess and provide suitable families, within the timescales laid down.
- To provide information on the process of adoption and the children available for adoption to enquirers wishing to adopt.
- To provide an adoption support service to enable a child to remain with an adoptive family and fulfil their full potential.
- To provide information on the process of adoption for enquirers wishing to adopt a child from overseas, a related child from within their family or a child conceived through donor or surrogacy.
- To provide information, help and support to those people wishing to obtain information about, and from, their birth records.
- To provide information, help and support for all those who have been affected by adoption whether prior to, or after, the making of an Adoption Order.
- To provide support, supervision and staff care for all those employed by the Adoption Service.

- To provide opportunities for adoption workers to increase their knowledge in new research and developments.

Children

Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their needs during childhood and beyond.

- All children being placed for adoption will be helped to understand, in an age appropriate way, why they are unable to live with their birth family and are being placed for adoption.
- The Adoption Service will nominate a link worker to work in partnership with the child's social worker to co-ordinate the work in order to successfully place the child for adoption with the minimum of delay.
- All children being placed for adoption will have a health assessment undertaken by a paediatrician using the Initial Health Assessment (IHA) Form.
- Every effort will be made to find a placement which meets the child's emotional and developmental needs taking into consideration their ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender and disability. However no child should have to wait indefinitely for the ideal placement.
- The Adoption Service will aim to recruit a wide range of families able to meet the differing needs of children requiring adoptive homes.
- Where there is little likelihood of recruiting a suitable adoptive family in Essex, the Adoption Service will seek a placement through the East Anglian Consortium of Adoption Agencies or the National Adoption Register for England and Wales. Children will also be featured, where it is legally possible to do so, in relevant publications to enhance their chances of finding a suitable adoptive family.
- All children placed for adoption will have an Adoption Support Plan. In some circumstances, a child may be eligible for adoption financial support, either as a single payment or in exceptional circumstances as regular payments over an agreed period. Regular payments of financial support are subject to an annual financial assessment.
- All children who are of an age to understand will be encouraged to contribute to their Child Permanence Report and adoption reviews in an age appropriate way.
- The Adoption Service acknowledges the importance of the relationships between brothers and sisters and will always consider placing brothers and sisters in the same adoptive family. Where brothers and sisters are not living together, the Adoption Service will promote appropriate contact between them.
- The Adoption Service recognises and supports the importance of children having suitable contact with their birth families and other important people. Such contact is entirely governed by the best interests of the children. Contact can vary from an

annual exchange of written information through to face to face contact with members of the birth family.

- The Adoption Service operates a letterbox contact arrangement for the exchange of information between adoptive families and birth families. The Essex Post Adoption Team will assist in reviewing the contact arrangements where requested.
- The Adoption Service will make arrangements for at least one meeting between a child's birth parent and prospective adopters around the time of placement providing this is in the child's best interests; other significant birth relatives may also be involved.
- The Adoption Service believes in the importance of children retaining the forename chosen by their birth parents as this is an integral part of their identity. However in exceptional circumstances where a child has been given a very unusual name which could easily identify them, or a name that could cause them embarrassment, the Adoption Service will seek a direction from the court to change the name.
- The progress of children awaiting placement will be monitored regularly by the adoption panel.
- Children who are placed for adoption will continue to be regularly reviewed by an Independent Reviewing Officer and have periodic health assessments until the Adoption Order is made.
- The adoption panel will be informed if the plan for adoption changes.
- In the event of an agency placement breaking down before an Adoption Order is made, a disruption meeting will be held no earlier than 28 days following the disruption and no later than the second LAC review. The purpose of the meeting is to share

information, improve practice and learn lessons for the future. The adoption panel and the adoption management team will receive a summary of the main learning points.

- All children who are of an age to understand will have access to written information about the adoption process e.g.:
 - specially commissioned Essex Children's Guide ("Understanding Adoption") and
 - Essex Children's Guide to Adoption Support Services ("Adoption Support"),
 - BAAF Children's Guide ("Adoption – What it is and what it means") and
 - the "Billy Book" Series.
- All children placed for adoption will be provided with a Life Story Book and a Letter for Later Life by the second adoption review (four months after placement for adoption).
- Adoptive families will receive details of children's adoption groups organised through Barnardo's LINK
- The Southend, Essex and Thurrock Child Protection Procedures will be followed where an allegation of abuse is made in the case of a child placed for adoption in Essex. Where there are child protection issues relating to Essex children who are

placed outside the county, investigations will be carried out in line with local safeguarding procedures.

- Essex County Council does not sanction any form of physical punishment of children who are looked after by a carer, whether foster carers or adopters.

Birth Families

The wishes and views of birth families are important and will be considered. All alternatives to adoption will be explored. They will be offered support both before and after the making of an Adoption Order.

- The Adoption Service will provide counselling and written information to birth parents about adoption, in order that they understand the process and know their rights. Birth parents will be consulted about possible adoptive families. The Adoption Service will also fund independent counselling through Barnardo's LINK.
- The Adoption Service will work closely with the birth family to ensure the child is provided with all necessary information about their background and will at all times promote a positive but balanced image of the birth family. Birth parents will be encouraged to share information about themselves and their family, including making a contribution to the Child's Permanence Report, to help give their child, now and in the future, the fullest understanding possible of their birth family.
- The Adoption Service will take into account birth parent's wishes with regard to the religious upbringing of their child. In the case of older children their views will be taken into account.
- The Adoption Service will provide the birth parents with an agreement outlining how parental responsibility is to be shared between prospective adopters, the Adoption Service and themselves once the child has been placed for adoption.
- The Adoption Service will make arrangements for at least one meeting between a child's birth parent and prospective adopters around the time of placement providing this is in the child's best interests; other significant birth relatives may also be involved.
- The Adoption Service recognises and supports the importance of children and young people who are adopted having suitable contact with their birth families and other important people. Such contact is entirely governed by the best interests of the children involved. Contact can vary from an annual exchange of written information through to face to face contact with members of the birth family.
- The Adoption Service operates a letterbox contact arrangement for the exchange of information between birth families and adoptive families. The Essex Post Adoption Team will assist in reviewing the contact arrangements where requested.
- The Adoption Service can hold information from birth families and people who have been adopted, which can be exchanged on request.

- The Adoption Service will provide advice, guidance and counselling to birth relatives wishing to trace adult adopted relatives. With the consent of the person who has been adopted and their birth family the Adoption Service will exchange relevant information and can act as an intermediary.
- The Adoption Service actively encourages feedback from birth parents about the service they have received.

Adopters

Adoption should always have as its prime consideration the benefits to children and not the needs of adults. Adoptive families must be well prepared and supported for looking after a child in need of adoption.

Agency Adoption

Agency adopters are approved by an adoption agency to adopt children in England and Wales.

- The Adoption Service does not discriminate against applicants on the grounds of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, disability or marital status providing the Adoption Service believes they can meet the needs of a child into independence.
- Enquirers currently undergoing infertility treatment will not normally commence the adoption process until treatment has been completed and they have come to terms with the reality of not having their own children.
- There are many more enquiries from people wishing to adopt children than there are children available. The Adoption Service therefore prioritises applications from people most likely to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive homes.
- The Adoption Service will provide initial written information and counselling to enquirers seeking to adopt a child and may decide not to proceed with the enquiry if there are significant concerns about an enquirer's suitability.
- The Adoption Service would normally expect the youngest existing child in a family to be at least 2 years old before the start of another application.
- Adoption Orders should have been made on children already placed before the start of another application.
- Each application will be considered individually. Any medical condition will not necessarily be a bar to adoption. Prospective adopters make a commitment to care for a child into adulthood and should therefore be reasonably confident that they will remain in good health.
- It has been shown that children's health is adversely affected by passive smoking. The Essex Fostering and Adoption Smoking Policy states that children under 5 or children with disabilities should not be placed with adoptive parents who smoke and in all kinship adoptive placements the additional health risks to the child of being placed in a smoking household need to be carefully balanced against the benefits of the placement for the child.

Where prospective adopters have given up smoking, children in the high risk group will not usually be placed with them until they have given up smoking successfully for 12 months.

- The Adoption Service will contact all previous partners where there were children involved, and all previous partners of two or more years standing, before the start of the home study assessment.
- All first time adoptive applicants will be required to attend a preparation course, complete a feedback form and meet with the trainers following completion of the course.
- Where people are adopting for a second or subsequent time, attendance at preparation groups may not be required if the Adoption Service is satisfied the applicants are up-to-date with current adoption requirements and philosophy.
- Foster carers applying to adopt a foster child who is living with them will be required to attend a preparation course.
- Applications by Essex County Council staff will be dealt with by an adoption team in a different part of Essex to where the applicants work. Suitability is considered in the same way as for other applicants.
- Applicants will be financially responsible for their initial medical examination. The Adoption Service will pay for any subsequent updates or supplementary medical reports.
- All prospective adopters' reports will be considered by an Essex adoption panel who will make a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker regarding their suitability.
- Once an application has commenced and the Adoption Service is of the view that the applicants are not suitable, the Adoption Service will give the applicants the opportunity to have their case considered by the adoption panel.
- Applicants are invited to attend the adoption panel when their application is being considered and the adoption panel considering any subsequent match with a child.
- If the Agency Decision Maker does not approve an applicant, the applicant can ask for the decision to be reviewed by an independent panel through the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).
- Adoption social workers will maintain a minimum of eight-weekly contact with prospective adopters in addition to undertaking a formal review of their approval every six months.
- Prospective adopters can have their details included on the Adoption Register for England and Wales and circulated to the East Anglian Consortium of Adoption Agencies three months after approval, and earlier if they are offering a scarce resource and no suitable child is waiting in Essex.
- Prospective adopters will be given comprehensive written information about children for whom they are being considered. This information must be returned to the Adoption Service if no placement is made, or the placement disrupts.

- Prospective adopters will be made aware that they can only change a child's name prior to an Adoption Order by order of a court or with the consent of all those with Parental Responsibility.
- The Adoption Service will make arrangements for at least one meeting between the prospective adopters and a child's birth parent around the time of placement providing this is in the child's best interests; other significant birth relatives may also be involved.
- The Adoption Service will support prospective adopters to maintain contact with birth parents and other important people, where it has been determined as being in the child's best interest. This can range from an annual exchange of written information to face to face contact with members of the birth family.
- The Adoption Service operates a letterbox contact arrangement for the exchange of information between adoptive families and birth families.
- All children placed for adoption will have an Adoption Support Plan which will also reflect the prospective adopters' needs. In some circumstances adoption financial support may be payable, either as a single payment or in exceptional circumstances as regular payments over an agreed period. Regular payments of financial support are subject to an annual financial review.
- The Adoption Service will meet all reasonable settling-in costs, particularly in relation to health and safety equipment.
- The Adoption Service will, subject to specific criteria, meet prospective adopters' legal expenses incurred in their Adoption Order application in respect of a child placed with them by Essex.
- Prospective adopters are expected to meet the costs of their court application fees unless they are on Income Support in which case the Adoption Service will meet the cost. Prospective adopters receiving other benefits or on low incomes may be able to apply to the courts for a waiver or reduction of this fee.
- The Adoption Service actively encourages feedback from adopters about the service they have received.

Inter-Country Adoption

Inter-country adopters are approved by an adoption agency to adopt a child from a specific overseas country. The Department for Education will, if satisfied, endorse the application and issue a certificate of eligibility to adopt in that country.

- The Adoption Service expects that all work in relation to inter-country adoption will be undertaken to the same standards as agency adoptions.
- The Adoption Service will provide initial written information and counselling to applicants seeking to adopt a child from another country.
- The Adoption Service will provide information about related organisations and support groups.

- The Adoption Service does not discriminate against applicants on the grounds of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, disability or marital status providing the Adoption Service believes they can meet the needs of a child into independence.
- Each application will be considered individually. Any medical condition will not necessarily be a bar to adoption. Prospective adopters make a commitment to care for a child into adulthood and should therefore be reasonably confident that they will remain in good health.
- The Adoption Service will charge applicants for all work undertaken in connection with their application, following the initial advice and guidance. These charges will be clearly set out in a letter which prospective inter-country adopters need to agree before work commences.
- The Adoption Service will contact all previous partners where there were children involved, and all previous partners of two or more years standing, before the start of the home study assessment.
- The Adoption Service will be responsible for the appointment of a suitably qualified social worker to undertake the prospective adopters report.
- Enquirers are responsible for meeting the costs involved in attending an information day and a preparation course run by the Inter-Country Adoption Centre which provide information and an opportunity to consider the issues involved in inter-country adoption.
- It is the responsibility of the enquirers to decide the country from which they wish to adopt.
- Applicants will be financially responsible for their initial medical examination. The Adoption Service will pay for any subsequent updates or supplementary medical reports.
- All prospective adopters' reports will be considered by an Essex adoption panel. The panel needs to be satisfied that applicants have fully considered how they intend to meet the child's emotional and developmental needs including their religion, ethnicity, culture and language.
- Applicants are invited to attend the adoption panel when their application is being considered.
- The Adoption Service will provide, at no charge, support services to sustain and develop the relationship between the adopters and child.
- Adoption social workers will maintain a minimum of eight-weekly contact with prospective inter-country adopters, in addition to undertaking a formal review of their approval every six months.
- The Adoption Service actively encourages feedback from adopters about the service they have received.

Non-Agency Adoption

These are adoptions which have not been arranged by an adoption agency and include step-children, adoption by other relatives and children conceived through donor or surrogacy.

- The Adoption Service will provide advice, information and counselling for those who are seeking to secure the adoption of their partner's child or are independently seeking to adopt a child in their care.
- The Adoption Service will prepare a detailed report for the court. The Adoption Service will have considered all alternatives to adoption with the applicants and will only recommend adoption where it is in the child's best interest for such an order to be made.
- In order to assess whether adoption is in the best interest of the child it is necessary to seek the child's own views and the views of the birth parent who is not making the application. Similarly the views of wider members of the family will be taken into consideration where appropriate.
- Applicants will need to demonstrate to both the Adoption Service and the court that they are in a stable and secure relationship and the step-parent has a well-established relationship with the child.
- For other relatives who wish to adopt the procedure is as described above but additionally the applicants and child are required to undergo medical examinations.
- Applicants are responsible for meeting the costs of court application fees and any medical reports required in relation to their application.
- The Adoption Service will endeavour to keep applicants informed of any delays in the process.
- The Adoption Service actively encourages feedback from non-agency adopters about the service they have received.

Post Adoption

Placing children in adoptive families is only the beginning. Supporting the placement and recognising the ongoing needs of the adopted person alongside those of their birth and adoptive families is equally important.

- The Adoption Service will offer a range of post adoption support for people who have been adopted, birth families and adopters.
- The Adoption Service will prioritise resources focused on maintaining the relationship between an adoptive child and their adoptive family
- Newly approved adopters are actively encouraged to take up two years' free membership of Adoption UK which provides a comprehensive range of Adoption Services both locally and nationally.
- The Adoption Service will stimulate the development of a broad range of adoption support services in partnership with the voluntary sector, and encourage adoptive families to seek information or assistance when required.
- The Adoption Service will facilitate post-adoption contact where required in those cases where there is either an informal agreement or a Contact Order and will provide support to those involved.
- The Adoption Service operates a confidential letterbox contact arrangement for the exchange of information between adoptive families and birth families.
- The Adoption Service can hold information from birth families and people who have been adopted which can be exchanged on request.
- Where adopted people, under the age of 18, seek further information and possible contact with their birth family, the Adoption Service will offer counselling and other appropriate services. This will usually be in conjunction with the adoptive family.
- Where adopted people over the age of 18 request further information and possible contact with their birth family, the Adoption Service will offer counselling and act as an intermediary.
- The Adoption Service strongly supports the National Contact Register so that all parties to an adoption can record their mutual willingness to be approached. An intermediary service will be available when a link has been made on the register.
- Where birth families contact the Adoption Service seeking further information and possible contact, the Adoption Service will act as an intermediary if the whereabouts of the adult who has been adopted are known.
- The Adoption Service encourages all parties to adoption to use the services provided by the Post Adoption Centre (London), which offers an information and advice service.
- The Adoption Service actively encourages feedback from people about the service they received.

General Duties

- The Adoption Service will work in partnership with other statutory and voluntary agencies in order to provide the best possible range of Adoption Services within the resources available.
- The Adoption Service will treat people fairly, openly and with respect throughout their involvement with the service.
- The Adoption Service will maintain strict confidentiality and ensure the security of all adoption records.
- The Adoption Service will provide a range of leaflets for people interested in or affected by adoption.
- The Adoption Service will ensure that the Essex Adoption Panels comply with relevant Regulations and Guidance.

Reviewing the Adoption Service Policy Statement

The Adoption Service will review the Policy Statement annually in conjunction with the Statement of Purpose.

The information contained in this Policy Statement can be made available in alternative formats: large print, Braille, audiotape or disk. We can also translate the information into other languages, please contact the Essex Adoption Service:

By telephone: 01245 434030

By fax: 01245 434311

Cllr. Sarah Candy, Lead Member for Children's Services

Signed



Date

Cllr. Ray Gooding, Deputy Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Signed



Date

and Jean Imray Interim Director For Children's Social Care

Signed



Date

have approved this Adoption Policy Statement.

This booklet is issued by

Essex County Council Adoption Service.

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