Our vision is that services and support in Hertfordshire give every child the opportunity to thrive, in their families, in their school and in their communities.
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1. Introduction

The Adoption Service for Hertfordshire County Councils is part of the overarching Adoption and Fostering Service and works collaboratively with local services, schools and external agencies.

Children’s Services vision is for Hertfordshire to give every child the opportunity to thrive in their families, in their schools and in their communities. All children and young people should enjoy a happy healthy childhood which gives them the foundations for adulthood and the opportunity to get the best out of life.

The Adoption Service contributes to this vision by seeking to provide permanent families for children and young people who cannot live with their birth families, enabling them to thrive within a safe and secure environment.

Hertfordshire County Council has an Adoption & Fostering Recruitment Team who support all potential adopters through the initial stages of an application. There are two Adoption Assessment teams who assess potential families, make adoption placements and provide support to these families until 1 year after the granting of an adoption order. There is an additional dedicated Family Finding Team, to support the identification of an appropriate match for children. The Adoption Support Team provides support for birth families, adoptive families, children who are adopted and adult adoptees.

There is a two-step assessment process; the first part, Stage One of the assessment, is ‘Adopter led’ and the second Stage Two is ‘Agency led’. We have a strong emphasis on customer service, mutual working agreements and a contractual approach to completing assessments. Timelines for completing each section of the assessment process and procedures for prospective adopters to take time limited breaks from assessment are provided. The initial Stage One recruitment process is managed within the joint Adoption and Fostering Recruitment Team and the Stage Two assessment is managed within the Adoption Assessment Teams.

The Adoption Service in Hertfordshire recognises the critical importance of achieving permanency for a child with a plan for adoption in a timely manner. We work proactively with national targets set for monitoring the performance of Local Authority Adoption Services (The Adoption Scorecard) in relation to the child’s journey through care and the timeliness of matching with adoptive families.
The Adoption Service is fully engaged with the Adoption Change Agenda, as set out in ‘Regionalising adoption’ DfE June 2015 and ‘Adoption : a vision for change’ DfE, March 2016.

Hertfordshire County Council is part of Adopt East, an alliance of Adoption Services (partners) and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (Essex, Suffolk, Southend, Luton, Adoptionplus and Barnados. The priorities of the Alliance are as follows:

- Decisions about placements are always made in the child’s best interests
- Service delivery has at its heart innovation and practice excellence
- Social Workers are highly skilled professionals who make high quality evidence-based decisions and do not tolerate damaging delay for children in their care
- Matches are made without unnecessary delay
- Fostering for Adoption to offer children early permanence placements
- Every adoptive family has access to an ongoing package of appropriate support with a high-quality specialist assessment of need
- The voice of adopters and their children is at the heart of national and local policy making and delivery of services

2. The Adoption Service Principles

The Adoption Service seeks to promote the principles and practice enshrined in the:

- The Children Act 1989
- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Voluntary Adoption Agencies (Amendment) Regulations 2005
- Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendment) Regulations 2003
- National Minimum Standards for Adoption Services 2011
- The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) (Amendment Regulations 2007
- Adoption Support Agencies (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2010
- Adoption Agency regulations 2013
- Adoption keylist (Children’s & Families Bill 2014)
- Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014/2015
- Adoption Statutory Guidance 2015

Key Objectives:

- promote and safeguard the welfare of children throughout their childhood and beyond
- promote working in partnership with children and their families
- provide children with a caring, safe experience of living in a permanent family
- listen to children and young people and take their views into consideration
- promote equality of opportunity, recognising and providing for each child and young person’s racial, cultural and religious needs, ensuring that staff and carers value diversity
- work in an open and accessible way, treating children, young people, adoptive families, birth families and adult adoptees with fairness and respect
- Work with a range of professionals and agencies, to ensure that children and young people and their parents and carers are provided with the services and support to meet their needs
**Outcomes Framework**
The Adoption Service is working to improve outcomes for Hertfordshire’s Children Looked After, providing them with a safe and secure environment in which they can thrive.

Hertfordshire has developed an Outcomes Framework, the ‘Six Outcome Bees’ in consultation with a wide range of people across Hertfordshire to help us measure the positive difference, working alongside our partners, are making to the lives of our service users.

We want children, young people, young adults and their families to;

![Six Outcome Bees Diagram]

The outcomes are inter-linked with all the ‘bees’ being important for the child or young person. This outcome framework will enable us to set clear and measurable targets across the six domains that are agreed with service users, their families and our partners. Further information about the Six Bees Outcome Framework is available at [https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/outcomebees](https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/outcomebees)
3. Adoption Service Aims:

- provide a service responsive to the needs of children, who require a permanent family placement, recruiting sufficient adopters to meet those needs
- recruit applicants in line with local and national identified needs and annual service targets
- provide a family that meets the requirement of the child’s care plan and reflects the child’s overall placement needs. Wherever possible, and particularly in relation to relinquished babies, we aim to ensure that the placement reflects the birth parent(s) wishes
- provide an adoptive family committed to maintaining contact arrangements in line with the child’s needs and wishes and the arrangements set out by the court
- ensure every effort is made to find an adoptive home which meets the child’s emotional and development needs. The avoidance of drift and delay will be paramount. Where a placement is not identified within the child’s timescale, the care plan will be actively reviewed
- value adopters, providing them with a high standard of support and guidance through individual sessions with their link social worker, support groups and pre and post approval training, to ensure they are well prepared and supported for the task of becoming adoptive parents
- promote current government policy in achieving a wider, more diverse pool of adoptive parents who are able to provide lifetime care for children who have been looked after
- ensure that applicants are not discriminated against on the grounds of gender, religion, ethnic origin, cultural and linguistic back ground, nationality, disability and sexual orientation. The service aims to be open and accessible, ensuring that practice complies in every respect with Hertfordshire County Council’s Equal Opportunities policy, “Putting People First”.
- ensure thorough assessment, approval and post approval support which enables adoptive parents to provide a high standard of care in a safe and secure environment
- encourage positive relationships through the use of ‘Motivational Interviewing’ across the service, with the aim of empowering adopters, children and the workforce to promote sustained change where necessary
- place siblings together wherever possible and where it is in the best interests of each child
- employ an innovative range of family finding techniques including the use Adoption Match, Link Maker and a range of adopter led matching activities
- offer a service to those wishing to adopt from overseas or those wishing to pursue non-agency adoption
- provide an intermediary service to birth families as outlined in the adoption support policy
- offer a service in line with access to records for adoptions both pre-commencement and post commencement
- provide, on request, an assessment of needs for adoption support services for all adopted people, adopters and birth parents
- provide a range of support services to families post placement and post adoption in line with Adoption Support regulations. This includes financial support, to those with adoption orders in accordance with assessed need and, in the case of financial support, assessed means, in line with Adoption Support Regulations
- work in partnership with all those affected by adoption and provide information and advice on all adoption matters to the general public and other professionals
- ensure all information / records will be treated confidentially and held securely
4. Management and Staffing

The Adoption Service is comprised of five teams, managed by the Adoption Service Manager:

The Adoption and Fostering Recruitment Team
The AFRT manages the adoption pre-stage and stage one process. This includes taking enquiries, running regular information evenings, providing initial training and undertaking statutory checks, up to the point of handover to the Assessment Teams (stage two). The team includes:

- 1 Adoption & Fostering Recruitment Manager
- 1.5 Senior Practitioner
- 2 Children’s Practitioners
- 3 FTE (full time equivalent) Recruitment Officers
- 1 Marketing Assistant
- 3 FTE Business Support Officers

The recruitment team also commission specific fostering and adoption marketing and communications support from the Hertfordshire County Council Corporate Communications team.

Adoption Assessment Teams
Two Adoption Assessment Teams (East and West) assess and support prospective adoptive parents and also match children with approved adopters. The East and West Assessment Teams each include:

- 1 Adoption Team Manager
- 6.5 FTE (full time equivalent) Adoption Social Workers
- 1 FTE Administrator

Family Finding Team
The Family Finding Team works to identify families for children and is made up of:

- 1 Family Finding Manager
- 6 FTE Social Workers
- 2.5 FTE Children's Practitioners
- 1 FTE Administrator

Adoption Support Team
The Adoption Support Team provides support to children and their adoptive parents prior to and post adoption. The team also provides a counselling and advice service to adult adoptees who want to see their child care records or trace birth relatives.

- 1 Adoption Support Team Manager
- 1 Consultant Social Worker
- 7 FTE Social Workers
- 2 FTE Children’s Practitioners
- 2 FTE Administrators

In addition to the adoption teams, the Adoption & Fostering Panel Team supports the Adoption Panel and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) process. The team, supported by business support workers, ensures that statutory timescales regarding the production of reports and minutes of Panel meetings are met. The Adoption Service Manager acts in an advisory role to the Children’s ADM.
4. Management and Staffing (continued)

In 2017, Hertfordshire developed a new post of Matching Co-ordinator. The aim of this post is to improve children’s timeliness by working closely with children’s social workers to identify early linking or matching. The Matching Co-ordinator attends the majority of initial legal planning meetings where there is a proposed plan for permanence and to consider viability for an early permanence placement. The Matching Co-ordinator contributes to the tracking of all children’s journey where the plan is likely to be adoption.

All social work staff are required to have the Diploma in Social Work or equivalent on appointment and are registered with the HCPC. All staff are subject to satisfactory Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) enhanced disclosure checks. All social work staff meet the requirements required under the Restriction of Preparation of Adoption Reports regulations 2005.

5. Adoption Activity 31st March 2018

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Placement orders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children placed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children waiting not matched</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopters approved</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Compliments and Complaints

Compliments and complaints are received in the spirit of open communication. Information regarding this is provided to enquirers at the initial information meeting. We aim to resolve complaints quickly and informally at a local level wherever possible and actively use them to learn and improve our services.

Formal Complaints are dealt with in accordance with Children Services’ Complaints Procedure. The complaints procedure has three stages and complainants are advised at each stage of their right to request that their complaint be referred to the next stage if they are not satisfied that it has been resolved. An information leaflet, ‘Open to Complaint’ is available on request.

The Independent Review Mechanism is available for adopters in circumstances where the Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker for the agency (ADM) does not support their approval and for qualifying determinations in relation to post commencement adoptions.

7. Recruiting Adopters

The recruitment of adoptive families is undertaken by the Adoption and Fostering Recruitment team (AFRT) which is responsible for marketing and advertising in relation to both fostering and adoption. The Manager and social work staff are qualified and registered with the HCPC. Unqualified staff are supervised by a member of staff with an appropriate qualification.

In line with service needs, the target for the year is
to recruit up to 50 new adopters. The recruitment activity for adoption is driven by the need to recruit adopters for all children including those with complex needs.

- The service is currently prioritising adopters who are able to meet the needs of the children who require adoption

- The service further benefits from regional matching activity developed by Adopt East. This ensures all adopters approved have opportunities to be matched with a wider pool of children who have a plan for adoption

Adopters are recruited in line with the Adoption Service Recruitment Strategy plan, which is reviewed regularly to ensure it meets the needs of children with a plan for adoption. Potential adopters are recruited in accordance with the DfE Statutory Guidance on Adoption (July 2014) which relates primarily to the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Enquirers have equality of access to the adoption service and enquiries are welcomed from all sectors of the community.

Members of the public enquiring about adoption are contacted by a Recruitment Officer within one working day and an initial enquiry will be taken. The enquirers are sent an adoption information pack within five working days of their enquiry. If they wish to take their interest further, they are invited to an Adoption Information Meeting (AIM). The AIM meetings are held monthly at 2 locations in Hertfordshire and are run by social workers from the recruitment and assessment teams. The aim of this meeting is to give information to potential adopters in the form of an overview of the process of adoption, as well as information regarding the backgrounds and needs of children requiring adoption. Should enquirers wish to proceed, potential adopters are invited to complete an expression of interest form. On occasions, this will be followed up with a telephone call to discuss their individual circumstances with a social worker. Suitable applicants will then be invited to a Foundation Day, run jointly by social workers and experienced adopters, as well as involvement from the Family Finding Team. This day provides more detailed information regarding adoption, as well as giving applicants the opportunity to have any questions answered that they may have about adoption.

Following the Foundation Day, a decision is made between applicants and social work staff regarding progression to stage one. Potential adopters are then invited to a workshop where they complete a ‘Registration of Interest’ form which contains their permission to begin checks and references. At this stage, potential applicants are allocated to a worker within the team, who is able to provide individual support and guidance through the process as necessary.

The adoption recruitment process is divided into two distinct stages:

**Stage One**

Stage One begins when the prospective adopter/s receive written confirmation that their registration of interest for adoption has been accepted. A Stage One agreement is completed and this stage of the process is led by the potential adopters, who are responsible for providing the agency with the written information needed to progress their application.

This includes provision of information regarding their personal circumstances. The Stage One process is supported by three workshops, with the aim of enabling applicants to learn and develop
their understanding of adoption and the needs of children requiring adoption, as well as develop their peer support networks with other potential adopters.

The Adoption & Fostering Recruitment Team is responsible for initiating checks, including DBS checks and medicals, as well as personal references, ex-partner references and any other references pertinent to the application. Potential adopters are responsible, in most circumstances, for the cost of medical examinations.

In addition to the workshops, potential adopters will also be offered two days ‘Adoption Preparation Training’ (APT) run by social workers in the Adoption Service and experienced adopters. APT courses are available on a monthly basis. During this period, potential adopters are encouraged to take responsibility for their own development in relation to adoption by reading, meeting other adopters and, if necessary, obtaining further child care experience. Stage One should take no more than two months, unless there are good reasons for a delay or the adopter requests further time to complete this stage, which should be documented in the prospective adopter’s case record.

In conjunction with Adoption Preparation Training, applicants will be offered optional additional training on Early Permanency and Dual Approval in order to prepare them for the additional element in relation to the fostering task.

A Stage One review meeting will be completed by the Stage One worker alongside an assessment team social worker, to explore any issues raised in Stage One. This meeting will include considering the potential adopters’ reflections on training, explore any issues arising during stage one, identify any areas of development and consider the timing of progression to Stage Two.

Prospective adopters are able to take a break of up to six months between stage one and stage two. Where this break is longer than six months the prospective adopters will need to restart Stage One. When prospective adopters wish to proceed after a break, a social worker will respond within five working days of their contact and offer them a re-entry interview.

Following the Stage One review meeting, a Stage One summary report is written and submitted to the AFRT manager. At this stage, a decision as to whether to progress an application to stage two is made by the Adoption Service Management Group. Should there be a decision not to proceed, applicants will be informed in writing of the reasons and if appropriate, invited to meet with managers to discuss this decision in more depth.

**Stage Two**

If the outcome of Stage One is positive, the potential adopters will progress to Stage Two and transfer to the assessment team.

Stage Two assessments are undertaken by social workers in the Adoption Assessment Teams. Potential adopters are invited to attend day three of the Adoption Preparation Training. The Stage Two agreement is completed at the initial home visit by the allocated social worker. This includes information about the assessment, expected timescales as well as outlining the role of the adoption panel, ADM and access to the Independent Review Mechanism run by Coram BAAF. Stage Two assessments should be completed within four months, unless there are exceptional circumstances, which should be recorded in the prospective adopter’s file.

During Stage Two, prospective adopters are expected to undertake further home learning which, alongside home visits, informs the assessment of the prospective adopter’s suitability to adopt. The social worker produces a report (Prospective Adopter’s Report) which is presented to the Adoption Panel for consideration. The assessing social worker remains involved to support the prospective adopters post-approval, through selection, linking, matching and post-placement of a child/children and until a year after the granting of an Adoption Order.

**Second Applications/Foster Carers Adopting**

Where enquiries are made by approved adopters considering a second application or approved foster carers, they are fast-tracked into stage two where they will be assessed by a social worker in an adoption assessment team. Checks and references usually undertaken in stage one will be initiated as required during the assessment.
8. The Adoption Panel

The Adoption Panel considers:

- Approval of adopters
- Review of approvals
- Matching
- Relinquished babies
- Recommendations concerning deregistration.

The Adoption Panel advises on matching considerations, taking into account complexities around:

- The age range of the children
- Number of children
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Religion

The Adoption Panel also considers Brief Assessment Reports in situations where the agency is uncertain or does not wish to take an application forward. The Adoption Panel’s recommendation is notified to all parties verbally within 24 hours. This recommendation is then referred to the agency decision maker who takes the decision within 7 working days of the panel. All parties are then immediately informed of the decision.

Written confirmation is sent to applicants and birth parents within 48 hours. The agency decision maker is the Head of Children Looked After and is independent of the adoption agency.

The Adoption Panel Advisor completes the following tasks:

- monitor, evaluates and quality-assures panel reports
- liaising closely with the adoption and safeguarding social work teams
- advises panel members on adoption regulations and practice issues
- facilitates panel training and appraisals of panel members

9. Training

The Adoption Service offers regular training and preparation sessions for adopters at all stages of the process.

Following the initial preparation training, other programmes and learning opportunities are available to prospective and approved adopters. These include training on the following:

- Brain development and empathic parenting
- Background factors affecting adopted children (e.g. impact of alcohol/substance abuse, domestic violence and/or parental mental health)
- Contact
- Children’s needs
- The experience of adopting sibling groups
- Adopting with a birth child in the family
- Adoption for single carers
- Transitions (pre-placement date)
- Adopters’ Network Meetings
- Dydadic Development Psychotherapy
- Early Permanence Training

The empathic approach to parenting is being embedded within the whole service. Specific training is also provided to members of the prospective adopters’ extended family and friends in the form of twice yearly sessions. The sessions focus on helping those involved to assist in preparations for children being placed, as well as their role in providing ongoing support.

Adopters can access further learning & development opportunities provided by Hertfordshire Children’s
Services. The Adoption Support Team also offers regular training and support sessions for adoptive parents as part of a holistic programme of support.

This includes the following:

- consultation sessions for members of adoptive families
- consultation sessions in relation to the adopted child experience in school
- workshops on sharing the child’s story

Adopters are encouraged to take part in specialist training and to offer mentoring for other adopters coming through the process.

The Adoption Panel has training in accordance with regulations; it has a specific programme of learning and development for panel members, who are also invited to adoption service events and training.

10. Early Linking and Matching

All children who are placed for adoption will have their plan agreed by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). Once the ADM has made the decision that a child should be placed for adoption, the child is allocated an Adoption Social Worker. This worker is either from the Family Finding Team or the Adoption Assessment Team. The role of the Adoption Social Worker is to ensure that a placement is identified in a timely manner and that children are appropriately prepared for placement and transitions.

A tracking meeting is held on a weekly basis, with the Adoption Service Manager, Team Managers and Matching Co-ordinator, to ensure that children’s plans for adoption are progressing appropriately and that there is no delay. The Adoption Service has evidenced a consistently strong performance in the recruitment of prospective adopters and in seeking to place for adoption older children, those in sibling groups and children with complex needs.

Following approval, a Matching Agreement outlining how Hertfordshire Adoption Agency will assist adopters in finding the right child for them is completed. Adopters may choose to be referred to the Adoption Match and Adoption Link maker with their consent. Their details will be passed onto see if they have children who may be a suitable match.

Family finding is a shared activity across the Adopt East Alliance using both an internally managed register and via the Adoption Link Maker Service. The Family Finding Team in conjunction with the Adopt East Alliance run regular Family Finding Events in which children are profiled. Children without a placement order can be profiled anonymously to promote early linking. Adopter led matching events are regularly held within the region involving adopters and children to further support linking and matching. For example, The Adoption Service initiated the development of Craft Days, providing opportunities for adopters to meet children waiting for families.

Where there are potential links between children and Hertfordshire adopters, the Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) is sent to the children’s social worker and manager for their consideration. Timescales of 5 working days for selection are in place to avoid delay and ensure that decisions are made quickly about any potential links.

11. Early Permanence

Early Permanence is embedded within the adoption service. From the point of enquiry prospective adopters are provided with information about early permanence. Early permanence carers are approved adopters who have the skills, emotional resilience and willingness to be able to offer a child a loving and nurturing home. However, they also need to manage living with the uncertainty that the child may be returned to their birth family or moved to an alternative placement with other family/connected people.
This subject runs throughout all the training provided to adopters and the service also offers a tailored Early Permanence course run by social work staff and a foster carer who has adopted. It informs people coming through the process about what early permanence means, the benefits and challenges for all parties, how children are identified for early permanence, the court process, managing contact, dealing with the uncertainty and the responsibilities which come with the fostering role.

Adopters who can consider early permanence as both adopters and foster carers are approved dually at the Adoption panel. However, there have been some situations where the approved adopters have been approved as foster carers to care for a specific child.

Support is provided to dually approved carers through fostering allowances, settling in allowances and mileage is reimbursed. The dually-approved carers are supported by an adoption social worker who provides intensive advice and support. The adoption social worker provides a fostering handbook and details regarding fostering requirements. Information about any available support groups and training courses is also provided. They continue to offer support up until the point of an adoption matching panel or if the child leaves the early permanence placement.

Once an approved adopter, dually approved carers receive information about children needing early permanence placements. Information is shared with adopters about the child. The adoption social worker supports the carers in helping them decide if they feel that they are able to meet the child's needs and manage the particular set of circumstances around the child. A meeting or a telephone call with the Medical Advisor is arranged to share information regarding the child's health needs and background.

If the child's social worker feels that the carers are a good match and that they are able to meet all of the child's needs, then (wherever possible) there is a Pre-Matching meeting where arrangements are considered regarding the placement of the child and if possible, a transitions plan put in place for the child to move to the dually approved carers. Whilst fostering the child, the carers are kept updated about the care plan. If the court decides that the child should be adopted, then the adoption social worker, in agreement with the child's social worker, in agreement with the child's social worker will recommend that the carers attend matching panel. If this match is approved the placement will cease to be a fostering placement and it becomes an adoption placement.

12. Support

Each adopter has a named link worker, usually the assessment team social worker who visits regularly to offer support, advice and guidance. The link worker will remain involved up to the adoption order and by arrangement for 12 months following the order. This support may be provided by the link social worker or the Adoption Support Team.

All adopters have access to an assessment of need for adoption support when matched with a child and again at the point a child is placed. This assessment and any support services are again reviewed at the point of application for an adoption order. Once an adoption order is granted, adopters (including Inter-County adopters) have access to an assessment of need from the appropriate agency, although this does not give an automatic right to a service.

In making assessments and formulating adoption support plans there may be also consultation with partner agencies with the consent of the adopter(s). The resulting plan will be sent in writing to the adopters who will be invited to comment on the plan. A signed copy of the agreed plan will be kept on file. All adoption support plans are reviewed regularly or when there are changes to the family's circumstances. In the event that a one-off service is requested a detailed plan may not be required. In such cases a letter of notification will be sent to the adopters who will be asked to sign that they are in agreement to the service being provided.

Adoption Support Fund

The implementation of the Adoption Support Fund in May 2015 has helped many families and individuals in Hertfordshire access a wider variety of therapeutic services. The overall aim is to help children to recover from their previous experiences and bond with their adoptive families. For further information see: http://www.adoptionsupportfund.co.uk/
Contact
In all cases of direct contact between a child and birth family members, a key worker from the Adoption Support Team can be allocated to support those arrangements, if assessed as required.

Financial Support
Financial support may also be available under the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005. This support is means tested on an annual basis.

13. The Adoption Support Hub

During 2018/19 the Adoption Service will embark upon a transformation programme in relation to Adoption Support to ensure that support is targeted and meets the needs of families and children.

The Adoption Support Team can be contacted via Customer Services on 0300 123 4040 who will offer initial advice and guidance and contact to the adoption support team where required.

The Adoption Support team provides a helpdesk where further advice, guidance and support (including access to the Adoption Support Clinic) is available. The helpdesk operates 3 days per week Monday, Wednesday 9am-5.30pm and Friday 9am-4.30pm.

The Adoption Support Clinic which offers face to face consultations, take place on a weekly basis in differing venues (St Albans, Stevenage, Hemel Hempstead and Hertford). Appointments can be booked via the Adoption helpdesk. Clinics provide general advice, and undertake assessments to consider access to the Adoption Support Fund and referral for other therapeutic from the Adoption Support Hub.

The Adoption Support Hub is a virtual team of adoption workers drawn from the whole of the Adoption Service. The workers have a range of skills and expertise which can be used to support families. The current Adoption Support Team staff are an integral part of the Hub. Families are able to receive a range of therapeutic social work interventions. Clinical consultation to the hub is provided on a monthly basis from a qualified play therapist, who specialises in providing therapeutic work to children, families and adults.

The Adoption Support Team is developing a core offer of support, informed by the views of adopters. The five key areas include: education, teenagers, parenting, activities & events and birth family support. A strong link has been developed for adopters with the virtual school who are able to offer consultation regarding the needs of adopted children in a school setting.

14. Exchange of Letters (Adoption Support Service)

The Adoption Support Service provides a confidential system for the exchange of information between birth families and adopters. This is staffed by a dedicated 1 FTE Children’s Practitioner, with part time social worker oversight and 1 FTE administrator.

Records are kept of transactions and reminders are sent prior to the date of exchange. Social work support is available in the event of any difficulties or requests from any party for advice and assistance. The letterbox system is an integral part of the Adoption Service and often enables early intervention, indicating when more in depth support is required.

The Adoption Support Team is able to offer support and assistance to adopted adults and ensure access to birth relative counselling and support.

15. Equal Opportunities

The Adoption Service is opposed to direct or indirect discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnic origin, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation or religion. We aim to provide culturally sensitive services, ensure that all people are treated with equal respect and receive equal access to services. We are also bound by the Armed Forces Covenant in considering assessment of armed forces personnel.

All training carried out by Adoption Service staff will reflect anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. Any expressed discrimination will be challenged. Anti-discriminatory practice features in preparation, assessment, training and ongoing support of carers. Adopters will be expected to develop the skills to identify and challenge discriminatory practice where it exists.
16. Monitoring & Evaluation

Adopters evaluate training, preparation and assessment groups to inform future service development. There are regular focus groups of adopters which meet with the Adoption Service to co-produce improvements and implement new models of practice. This also includes adopter’s participation in workstream activities and the Adopt East Regionalisation Programme.

Attendance at Panel by adopters is also evaluated for user satisfaction. The chair of the Adoption Panel prepares an Annual Report on the work of the Adoption Panel.

The submitted work of the Adoption Panel and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for children’s care plan for adoption is quality assured by the Panel Advisor and the ADM adviser and reported to the Head of Adoption and Fostering. Quarterly panel management meetings are held to monitor panel activity and to assure quality outcomes for children with a plan for adoption.

All reports submitted to the Adoption Panel and the ADM for children’s care plans are quality assured by their operational managers, the panel and ADM advisors. Quality assurance reports are sent to children’s social workers and managers for each report submitted.

The work of the Adoption Agency is reported on an annual basis to elected members through the Children Services Cabinet Panel.

17. Client and User Involvement

The Adoption Service aims to seek views from a range of service users, including representatives from other agencies, from adopters, from young people and from adult adoptees, and birth relatives.

The views of children and young people receiving a service are sought through the department’s Independent Review Team, Participation Strategy, feedback from the Advocacy Service, outcome of complaints and lessons from disruption meetings. The Children’s Participation Team supports and develops young people in care and care leavers to enable them contribute to training and recruitment of staff.

Children’s views are sought in relation to the plan for adoption, dependent upon their age and understanding. Leaflets and information books are available for use with children. Contained within the ‘Children’s Guide’ is a Statement of Purpose designed specifically for children. Children are required where appropriate in view of their age and understanding to give permission for their names to be placed on the adoption register.
There is extensive information available for birth relatives to make their views concerning the plan for adoption known to the panel. There are also arrangements for the Adoption Support Team to support birth relatives where they require or request it. The participation of birth relatives in relation to the child’s permanence report is monitored by the panel adviser.

**Youth Panel**

A Youth Panel has been set up in the Adoption Service to improve the preparation of approved adopters for the rest of their adoption journey.

The opportunity to meet with the Youth Panel is offered to adopters identified as being most likely to benefit from the experience. Approved adopters attend voluntarily, it is not part of the assessment process, but identified as valuable in the preparation for adoption.

The Youth Panel provides young people who are accessing adoption support services the opportunity to be involved in a group with other adopted young people, to contribute to the preparation of adopters and inform service planning.

The Youth Panel has highlighted the lifelong issues that adopted young people experience. This has enabled adoptive parents to make informed decisions regarding the care of the children they are adopting.

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**18. Recording and Access to Records**

The Adoption Service has a responsibility to maintain accurate records on all adopters and to ensure that information is shared with the user wherever possible. There is a statutory requirement to retain files for 100 years following adoption order. Adopters have a right to access to their records. Adopted children also have a right to access their record when they are 18 years old.

There are specific safe and secure facilities for the storage and archiving of adoption files. All files are indexed and categorised for ease of retrieval, which can normally be accomplished within 48 hours of request.

**Complaints and Concerns:**

The Children’s Services procedures can be accessed via Hertfordshire County Council’s website at [https://tinyurl.com/yb22xwdn](https://tinyurl.com/yb22xwdn)

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**19. Safeguarding**

Children placed for adoption both pre and post adoption and those in receipt of adoption support services are subject to Hertfordshire Local Safeguarding Childrens Board (LSCB) Child Protection procedures. It is also Hertfordshire’s Policy to refer allegations and concerns to the LADO (Local Authority Dedicated Officer) alongside safeguarding procedures. Whenever an allegation is made that a child placed with adopters may be suffering abuse or neglect, these procedures will be followed. The matter will be investigated and adopters will be informed of the outcome of the investigation and the implications for their circumstances. In accordance with the procedures, consideration will be given first and foremost to safeguarding the child but also to the support needs of the adopters. Written records will be kept of any allegation of abuse.

Where persons working for the adoption service, prospective adopters and children who have been placed for adoption have concerns about the welfare and safety of the child, they must refer the matter to Children’s Services for investigation.
20. Premises

**Service Manager Adoption Service**
Hertfordshire County Council
Adoption Team East
Farnham House SFAR 125
Stevenage
Hertfordshire
SG1 2FQ
Tel: 01438 844388

**Fostering & Adoption Recruitment Team**
Hertfordshire County Council
Fostering & Adoption Recruitment Team
Farnham House SFAR 131
Six Hills Way
Stevenage
Hertfordshire
SG1 2FQ
Tel: 01438 843281

**West Adoption Team**
Hertfordshire County Council
Rainbow House
228A Hatfield Road
St. Albans
Hertfordshire
AL1 4LW
Tel: 01438 844503

**East Adoption Team**
Hertfordshire County Council
Adoption Team East
Farnham House SFAR 125
Stevenage
Hertfordshire
SG1 2FQ
Tel: 01438 844388

**Adoption Support Team**
Hertfordshire County Council
Rainbow House
228A Hatfield Road
St. Albans
Hertfordshire
SG1 2FQ
Tel: 01438 844514

**Letterbox Exchange Service**
The Hertfordshire Adoption Support Service
PO Box 208
Welwyn Garden City
Hertfordshire
AL8 6WA

**Family Finding Team**
Hertfordshire County Council
Farnham House SFAR 130
Six Hills Way
Stevenage
Hertfordshire
SG1 2FQ
Tel: 01438 844514

**Adoption & Fostering Panel Service**
Hertfordshire County Council
County Hall
Pegs Lane
Hertford
Hertfordshire
SG13 9DF
01992 556904

**Ofsted**
Ofsted Piccadilly
Store Street
Manchester
M12 WD
Tel: 0300 1231231
For further information about our services contact:

0800 917 0925

Or visit our website:
www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/adoption