

Adoption Service

Statement of Purpose

This Statement of Purpose is published in accordance with the requirements of the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 and the Special Guardianship Regulations 2005 and will be revised annually.

It outlines the aims and objectives of Gateshead Council Adoption Service and provides information on the function, organisation and management of the services provided by, or in support of, Gateshead Council's Adoption Service.

Further information is available on Gateshead Council's website and in the information booklets and leaflets available through the Adoption Service. Social workers and members of staff can obtain more detailed information in the Adoption Service Policies and Procedures and in the Learning and Children's Service Procedures.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction
 2. Position Statement
 3. Function of the Adoption Service
 4. Aims of the Adoption Service
 5. Objectives of the Adoption Service.
 6. Principles of the Adoption Service.
 7. Working Partnerships
 8. The Adoption Panel.
 9. Service to Prospective Adopters.
 10. Special Guardianship Orders – Assessment and Support
 11. Systems for Monitoring and Evaluating Service Provision.
 12. Equal Opportunities.
 13. Complaints and Appeals Procedure.
 14. Useful Contact Numbers and Addresses
 15. References
- Appendix A - Organisational Structure
- Appendix B - Registered Manager and Staff
- Appendix C - Members of the Adoption Panel/Advisers
- Appendix D - Adoption Support Services Matrix

1. Introduction

- 1.1 It is a requirement of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 and the National Minimum Standards for Adoption (2003) that each adoption agency should have a Statement of Purpose, which includes its aims and objectives and sets out its service provision.

The Adoption Service is part of the children's services division of the Learning and Children function of Gateshead Council. As such it is a "Local Authority Adoption Service" as recognised within the Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003.

- 1.2 Gateshead Council Adoption Service office is based at:

Services for Looked After Children
Council Offices
Prince Consort Road
Gateshead
NE4 4HJ

- 1.3 Gateshead Council Adoption Service is inspected by Ofsted based at:

Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

Telephone: 08456 404040

Email: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

- 1.4 This Statement of Purpose will be made available upon request to:

- Any person working for the purposes of the adoption service
- Children who may be adopted
- The parents and guardians of children who may be adopted
- Persons wishing to adopt a child
- Adopted persons
- Adoptive parents

- Birth parents and former guardians of persons who **have** been adopted.
 - Ofsted
 - Councillors
 - Adoption Panel members
 - Special Guardians
- 1.5 A summary of the Statement of Purpose is included in the “Childrens’ Guide to Adoption”. The Childrens’ Guide is given to all children for whom adoption is the plan as soon as that decision has been made. It is also given to every prospective adopter who has a child placed with them by Gateshead Council Adoption Service.
- 1.6 The Statement of Purpose requires approval by the elected members of Gateshead Council. It is reviewed regularly and updated annually to incorporate any changes in policy and in the agency.

2. **Position Statement**

- 2.1 Gateshead Council and its Adoption Agency believe that, children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family who can meet their needs throughout their lifetime and wherever possible, it is best for children to be brought up within their birth family.
- 2.2 Gateshead Council and its partners will work to ensure that a comprehensive range of services are provided to support birth families to provide safe and appropriate care for their children. Where this is not possible, adoption can be one of a range of alternatives to enable children to grow and reach maturity within a stable and loving family setting.
- 2.3 The Adoption Service will comply with all the relevant legislation (Adoption and Children Act 2002, Children Act 1989) and associated regulations and guidance. The service will work to the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2003) and the National Adoption Standards for England (2001) to provide services to all those involved in the adoption process that are consistent with best practice.
- 2.4 Gateshead Council is committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for children as described in Vision 2030 and key performance measures and targets for improvement for 2008 – 2011.

The aims and objectives of the Adoption Service link to the Council's corporate priority of Empowering Children and Young People, which places emphasis on developing mechanisms to involve children and young people in the decision-making process and improving performance in adoptions Looked After Children.

2.5 In addition, the Adoption Service is mindful of the key concepts contained in "Every Child Matters" and the corresponding need to ensure that services seek outcomes that children in their care:

- Remain healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a contribution
- Achieve economic well-being

3. Functions of the Adoption Service

3.1 The Adoption Service is an integral part of Childrens' Services within the Learning and Children function. The primary responsibility of the Service is to provide a comprehensive range of pre and post adoption services to all parties involved in adoption.

3.2 The Adoption Service provides the following range of services:

- Information relating to adoption for the general public
- Recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters. This includes non-agency adoptions where the Adoption Service undertakes assessment work with step parents/civil partners wishing to adopt the child/children of their partner; and relatives who apply to adopt a child within their family. The Service is also responsible for the assessment of foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care
- The Adoption Service also has responsibility for inter-country adoption. Anyone wishing to adopt a child from overseas must first be approved as suitable by Gateshead Council. This process involves a fee and the issuing of a Certificate of Eligibility from the Department of Children, Schools and Families before the application to the Overseas Country can proceed

- Family finding for children with a plan of adoption
 - Adoption support to all parties involved in adoption including adopters, children, adoptees and birth families
 - Assisting with the preparation and review of Special Guardianship support plans
 - Birth records counselling for adopted adults
 - Support to maintain contact where appropriate and agreed between adopted children and their birth relatives
 - Support with tracing and reunification for adult adoptees
 - Intermediary services and additional support services can be accessed via the current Service Level Agreement with “Birth Ties”/After Adoption
- 3.3 An important function of the Adoption Service is to recruit sufficient adopters in-house to meet the needs of Looked After Children in Gateshead who are waiting to be adopted. Where this is not possible provision will be negotiated within the regional consortium and/or other national Local Authority or Voluntary Adoption agencies. Children and prospective adopters are referred to the National Adoption Register if it has not been possible to find a local or regional placement.
- 3.4 The annual priorities and objectives for the Adoption Service are documented in the Adoption Service Annual plan which is monitored and reviewed regularly and renewed each year.
- 3.5 The Service provides a range of information for prospective adopters, children and service users. These include recruitment brochures, information for birth families, a guide to adoption for Looked After Children, information about adoption panel and a guide to financial support for adopters.
- 3.6 Further information about the Adoption Service including the Statement of Purpose and links which allow enquirers to express an interest are available via Gateshead Council website. The service also has its own e-mail address and a dedicated phone line for enquiries: adoptionandfostering@gateshead.gov.uk - 0191 433 8333.

A Marketing & Recruitment Officer works in conjunction with the Council's publicity department and the Adoption and Fostering Services to draw up and implement a recruitment strategy which is reviewed annually and as required.

The aim of the strategy is to attract and recruit sufficient adopters and foster carers to meet the needs of Gateshead's Looked After Children.

Recruitment strategies include advertising on outdoor media, press adverts and news stories, mail outs and team involvement in local events and information events.

- 3.7 The local Safeguarding and Care Planning teams undertake the tasks of care planning, planning for permanence and preparing children for adoption in conjunction with the Adoption Service. These teams also work with the child's birth family during the decision making process for adoption.
- 3.8 The local Safeguarding and Care Planning teams collaborate in family finding, matching and supporting adoptive placements and contact arrangements until the adoption order is made. Adoption support to families is provided by the Safeguarding Team in collaboration with the Adoption Service until the Adoption Order is granted. This includes statutory visits and support in accessing services like education and health. Access to therapeutic services are also available.
- 3.9 An Adoption letterbox service is managed by the Adoption Service to enable adopted children to maintain indirect contact with their birth families. The letterbox facility can also be extended to include situations outside of adoption eg Special Guardianship and some long term fostering arrangements.

4. Aims of the Adoption Service

- 4.1 To provide an effective and efficient service for all those involved in the adoption process, including children and young people, adoptive families, birth families and adoptees, in accordance with the relevant standards, statutes and regulations.
- 4.2 To ensure that the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are kept at the centre of the adoption process (as per welfare checklist: S1 Adoption and Children Act 2002).
- 4.3 To ensure that when children cannot live within their own birth families they will be provided with a permanent, stable alternative family such as adoption and Special Guardianship, unless there is evidence to suggest this is not appropriate.

- 4.4 To ensure that all applicants interested in becoming adoptive parents are welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and given clear information about the process of recruitment, assessment and approval and relevant support services.
- 4.5 To ensure that birth families are treated with respect and openly and fairly throughout the adoption process and have access to independent counselling and adoption support services.
- 4.6 To ensure, wherever possible, that the timescales set out in Regulations are met. Where this is not possible, to clearly record the reasons why and to monitor performance against the relevant timescales.

5. Objectives of the Adoption Service

- 5.1 To recruit and support a sufficient number of adopters to enable children to be matched with adopters who can meet their needs and help them achieve their full potential in a stable and loving family. A recruitment strategy is in place to support this aim and placement choice is also ensured by working with other adoption agencies and consortia.
- 5.2 To maintain a high standard of assessment which focuses on the applicants' ability to meet the needs of children, their understanding of the tasks and issues involved in adoption and their suitability to be an adoptive parent.
- 5.3 To work positively with all children and fully recognise their particular needs, wishes and feelings and take these into account when decisions are made and to ensure a match with suitable adoptive parents is made within National Adoption Standards timescales.
- 5.4 To develop a range of support services for all those involved in the adoption process in order to promote the quality of people's lives including children and adoptive families, birth families and adult adoptees.
- 5.5 To maximise placement stability and reduce the risk of placement disruption through the ongoing development of post placement and post-adoption services. Ensuring that adoption support is effective through a range of partnerships with other agencies.
- 5.6 To maintain a properly constituted Adoption Panel governed by the relevant regulations to consider the case of every child, proposed adopter and placement referred to it by the agency.

- 5.7 To work with partner agencies and child care staff employed by Gateshead Council to promote and organize a quality service for children and families involved in the adoption process.
- 5.8 To maintain confidential adoption records.
- 5.9 To ensure that staff working in the field of adoption are appropriately recruited, trained and supervised to enable them to fulfil agency functions.
- 5.10 To ensure that cost effective services are provided, or commissioned, which maximise efficient use of resources.
- 5.11 To ensure that applicants for inter-country adoption are provided with an appropriate service from skilled experienced workers.

6. Principles of the Adoption Service

- 6.1 Gateshead Council achieved Beacon Status for 2002 - 2003 with regard to its adoption service. The Council is committed to continuous development of its adoption service and ensuring that it complies with the relevant legislative requirements and National Standards.
- 6.2 The relevant legislation and the corresponding National Adoption Standards and National Minimum Standards have been used to develop practice relating to the recruitment, assessment, training and support of adopters. These standards underpin all work carried out with those involved in the adoption process including children, adoptive families, birth families and adult adoptees.
- 6.3 The Adoption Service strives, through its systems and processes, to ensure delays in placing children in adoptive families are avoided, and recognises the detrimental impact this has on health and development. A child's birth heritage, religious, cultural and linguistic background are all important factors. The adoptive family should reflect this, if it can be found without unnecessary delay. No child should be denied adoptive parents solely on the grounds that child and parents do not share the same cultural or racial background.
- 6.4 The child's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of the adoption process and throughout, their wishes and feelings will be actively sought and taken into account in an age appropriate way.

- 6.5 Birth parents and birth families are entitled to services that recognize the lifelong implications of adoption. Birth parents will be provided with the opportunity to access support and information about the adoption process including the legal implications of adoption and their rights. This will include access to independent agencies such as Birth Ties/After Adoption.
- 6.6 The Service will maintain an inclusive and open recruitment strategy for adoptive families which will be welcoming irrespective of race, religion, gender, sexuality, class or marital status.
- 6.7 All efforts will be made to find adoptive homes where siblings can live together, unless this is not in their best interests or does not meet their individually assessed needs. Where this is the case, the reasons behind decisions to separate children will be clearly recorded on the child's file.
- 6.8 Plans for permanence should be expedited in a timely fashion and with avoidance of delays where possible.
- 6.9 Children with special needs and disabilities are entitled to the same opportunities to achieve a permanent family. Careful consideration will be given to recruiting a wide range of adopters to meet the varying needs of children requiring adoption.
- 6.10 Children are entitled to information about their past and their birth family in order to promote a sense of identity. Lifestory work will be promoted and provided for children requiring permanency.
- 6.11 The importance of continuing contact for children and their birth families is acknowledged and appropriate arrangements for suitable ongoing contact will be made unless there are circumstances which prevent this.
- 6.12 A range of support services will be offered or provided to all parties involved in adoption including children, adoptive families, birth families and adopted adults. The Adoption Service will work in partnership with other agencies to ensure such needs are met.
- 6.13 All parties involved in the process will have access to the Council's Complaints Procedure.
- 6.14 The Adoption Service will be monitored and reviewed as appropriate to seek improvements to services within available resources.

7. Working Partnerships

- 7.1 The Adoption Service annual planning cycle incorporates a review process whereby feedback from staff, service users and key stakeholders helps determine service priorities for the forthcoming year.
- 7.2 The Adoption Service has full membership of the British Association for Fostering and Adoption (BAAF). This provides the Adoption Service with access to a quarterly information pack, including publications and details of training events and practice notes. It also includes a licence for the use and reproduction of nationally recognised forms for adoption reports. BAAF produce a bi-monthly newspaper "Be My Parent" and have an online service which features the more difficult to place children.

The Service also maintains an involvement in the BAAF regional social work group, which promotes the development of good practice in fostering and adoption agencies within the region.

- 7.3 Gateshead subscribes to Adoption UK and receives its quarterly journals and the 'Children Who Wait' magazine which features children requiring adoption. From January 2010 Gateshead Adoption Service will also join all newly approved adopters to Adoption UK and pay their membership for the first year. This will enable them to access training, magazines, local support groups, "buddying networks" and a national helpline.
- 7.4 Gateshead Adoption Service is a member of the Northern Region Consortium of Adoption Agencies. The consortium consists of all Local Authority and Voluntary Adoption Agencies in the region. This group works in partnership to find families for children requiring adoption, provide training for adopters and staff, and develop procedures and guidance on good practice.
- 7.5 The REALAC team (Raising Education Achievement of Looked After Children) also works closely with the Adoption Service and offers consultation and post approval training for staff and adopters on a range of education issues
- 7.6 The Adoption Service has close links with the Council's Children's Services Social Work Therapy Team, a service which has been awarded a Charter Mark. The Social Work Therapists work closely with CAMHS and the Child and Family Psychiatry Unit at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

- 7.7 The Consultant Paediatrician who leads the Community Health Team for Looked After Children acts as Adoption Panel medical advisor and carries out health assessments on all children where adoption is the plan. The medical advisor works closely with the Adoption Service and will meet with all adopters to discuss individual children's health and welfare needs and prepare a written report for adopters. In addition there are close links with the Looked After Children Health Team and a dedicated nurse, Linda Hubbucks, for Looked After Children. LAC Psychologist Kevin Yates is also available to both the Fostering and Adoption Service for consultation.
- 7.8 The Adoption Service also maintains effective working relationships with regional agencies and projects such as "Birth Ties", an agency which provides independent support to all those involved in adoption and the Sahara project whose remit is to raise the profile of fostering and adoption as an aid to recruitment from the black minority ethnic population.

8. The Adoption Panel

- 8.1 Adoption Panels are part of the "quality control" of the work of Adoption agencies. Panel members, at least four of whom (including the Chair) are required to be independent of the agency, scrutinise the work of the agency and use their professional expertise or personal experience of adoption to provide recommendations to the Agency and the Agency's Decision Maker (the Director, Children and Young People) on the following:
- a) Whether a child should be placed for adoption.
 - b) Whether a prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child.
 - c) Whether a child should be placed for adoption with a particular prospective adopter.
- 8.2 The Panel may also consider and give advice to the Agency on contact issues, parental responsibility and provision of adoption support.
- 8.3 The Panel meets monthly but if necessary, there is facility to convene an extra Panel at short notice in an urgent case. A Schedule of Meetings is planned annually and circulated in advance.

- 8.4 Membership of the Panel should be gender-balanced as far as possible and reflect the composition of the local community. There must be no more than 10 panel members including:
- a) An independent Chair with the necessary skills and experience.
 - b) Two social workers each with at least three years relevant post qualifying experience.
 - c) An elected member of a local authority adoption agency.
 - d) The medical advisor to the adoption agency.
 - e) At least three independent persons including, where reasonably practicable, at least two persons with personal experience of adoption.
- 8.5 The Panel is fully minuted by a Panel Administrator who is also responsible for the circulation of reports in advance to Panel Members. The Agency Decision Maker is required to make the Agency Decision based on the Panel's recommendation within seven working days. The Panel administrator ensures that details of the recommendations are made available to relevant staff for placing on adopters or childrens' files.

See appendix for details of the current Panel membership.

9 Service to Prospective Adopters

- 9.1 Gateshead Council Adoption Service aims to provide stable, secure adoptive families for children who are unable, for whatever reason, to remain with their family of origin and for whom adoption is judged to provide the best alternative to secure their long-term wellbeing.

Working in partnership with others the Adoption Service recruits, prepares and supports adoptive families to meet the long-term needs of the children requiring adoption.

The Adoption Service provides an informative, helpful and sympathetic response to all who enquire about adoption. All prospective adopters are given equal consideration regardless of race, culture, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation or age, provided they can meet the needs of children who need adoption.

9.2 Recruitment of Prospective Adopters

A written recruitment strategy is in place and is reviewed as part of the business planning cycle on an annual basis. National Adoption Standards timescales are taken into account when recruiting adopters. If necessary, we will limit recruitment to prospective adopters who can meet the needs of the children referred to Gateshead Adoption Service.

The Service welcomes enquirers from all backgrounds and is happy to consider enquiries from within a 50 mile radius of Gateshead.

People who are interested in becoming adoptive parents are given clear information about the stages and timescales of the process. Out of hours requests for information are received by email and answer-phone.

An Adoption Duty Social Worker is available each afternoon Monday to Friday during office hours to take and follow up on adoption enquiries by e-mail, telephone, or in person, and to provide information about the type of children the agency places, the preparation, assessment and approval process, and what support is available. Details of Information Meetings and Preparation Group dates are provided and an Adoption Information Pack is sent out the same day to interested enquirers.

If the enquirer returns the initial enquiry form, two Adoption Social Workers will visit to discuss their interest in more detail and provide additional information about adoption.

Enquirers may choose to attend an open evening. These are held four times a year and provide more information particularly about the types of children waiting for adoption. Following the event, enquirers may be visited at home at their request by two Adoption Social Workers to discuss their interest in more detail.

A written record of the enquirer's involvement and discussions with the team is presented to and discussed with the Adoption Team Manager and a decision is made about whether this interest will be advanced further.

Enquirers are informed in writing of the decision and will be asked to attend further information sessions.

The purpose of such information sessions is to:

- Help enquirers see if adoption is right for them

- To prepare enquirers for the tasks involved and given them a realistic perspective

Once the information sessions are completed, prospective adopters will be asked to meet with one of the workers involved in the sessions and the Adoption Team Manager to provide feedback about the sessions and where applicable, will be asked to complete an application form.

The Adoption Service will also start the process to undertake references, health and statutory checks including a criminal records check.

We may need to advise enquirers at any stage of the process that we are unable to progress their enquiry. If this happens, the enquirer will be informed about the reason for this decision.

9.3 Preparation of Prospective Adopters

Once applicants have completed their application forms they are required to attend a preparation and training group. The purpose of the preparation and training event is:

- To help enquirers begin to consider the existing skills and abilities they have and which will help them parent an adopted child, and to think about how they might develop and supplement those skills.
- Observe the applicants through the group process to provide the agency with information about their suitability to proceed.

The information sessions and preparation training group are run by social work staff and experienced adopters. Guest speakers are also involved and can include experienced adopters and foster carers, the agency medical adviser, and a birth, grandparent. Speakers from external providers such as “Birth Ties” also provide input about the nature of their work and the implications for adopters.

The timing and the venue of the information sessions and preparation training courses is varied so as to meet the requirements of participants as much as is possible. Participants are informed that the preparation training is an essential requirement but if there are extenuating circumstances arrangements could be made for prospective adopters to attend training provided by another agency or to cover the training materials through home study or on an individual basis with the Assessing Social Worker.

The preparation training utilises the BAAF “Preparing to Adopt” training materials which includes a workbook for each participant.

9.4 **Assessment of Prospective Adopters**

Once applicants have completed their application forms and attended a preparation group, an assessing social worker is allocated to them to undertake a home study using the BAAF nationally recognised proforma.

The Adoption Service endeavours to complete the assessment report and present it to Adoption Panel within eight months of the formal application.

Prior to the home study commencing a Working Agreement is completed by the Social Worker and the applicant(s) which sets out the rights and obligations on both sides and schedules mutually agreed visiting times.

The Prospective Adopters Report covers the following areas:

- Applicant’s details and genogram
- Matching considerations
- Accommodation
- Verification of identity, career history, agency enquiries, CRB, Local Authority, NSPCC checks
- Health issues
- Three confidential personal references, not more than one of whom may be a relative and where an applicant is employed in a child care capacity, or with vulnerable adults an employers reference
- Applicants background, education, employment, chronology, hobbies/interests
- Relationships past and present
- Support networks
- Children in the household (if applicable)
- Other adults in the household (if applicable)

- Childlessness/limitations of family size, motivation
- Lifestyle
- Valuing diversity
- Parenting capacity
- Financial considerations
- Placement considerations
- Post adoption support requirements

The applicants are required to have full medical examinations of their physical and emotional health. These are paid for by the Adoption Service.

Applicants are required to nominate two personal referees who are not relatives. However, family members will also be visited if they will be closely involved in the adoption process or will be offering care for a child.

If applicants work with children or vulnerable adults they will be required to give an employer reference.

When the assessment report is completed the applicant(s) will be provided with a copy of the report and will be given 10 working days to consider it and make any comments. They should sign and return the report before it is booked onto the next available Adoption Panel.

If the applicants wish to waive the 10 working day period they can do so providing they are given sufficient time to read and sign the report.

The Adoption Team Manager or Senior Practitioner visits all applicants once they receive the copy of their assessment report and before Panel. This provides a quality assurance role and also gives applicants an opportunity to give feedback on the service they have received from the agency and comment on their experience of the process.

9.5 Approval Process for Prospective Adopters

Gateshead Council Adoption Panel considers all matters relating to the approval of adoptive families, identifying those children whose plan is adoption as well as matching children with prospective adopters.

The assessing Social Worker attends Panel and answers any questions raised by Panel members. All prospective adopters are invited to attend Panel when their report is being considered. Prospective adopters receive a leaflet outlining the process and it is made clear that if they choose not to attend Panel it will not prejudice their application.

The Panel are an experienced group of people with knowledge and experience of adoption which complies with the necessary regulatory requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and accompanying guidance. The Panel has an Independent Chairperson with experience of adoption matters.

There are representatives from Learning and Children, Health Services, an Elected Member, a number of independent members (who may include a birth parent), an adopter and adoptee or representatives from other adoption agencies or professional bodies. There is also a medical adviser, a legal adviser and an agency adviser to the Panel.

Panel members receive the reports in advance and after asking any questions or points of clarification from the Social Worker and applicant(s) may recommend approval, defer approval pending further work or recommend that applicants are not approved. The Panel may also consider shorter brief reports which are brought to Panel where the Agency view is that an assessment should not proceed further.

The Panel's recommendation must then be considered by the Agency Decision-Maker for the decision to be made.

However, prospective adopters are verbally notified of Panel's recommendations by telephone the same day if they are not in attendance. The prospective adopters are informed of the agency decision in writing within five working days.

Where there is a Qualifying determination, that is a decision not to approve, applicants are invited to submit their written representations to the Agency within 40 days of receiving their letter of notification.

If representation from the prospective adopters is received by the agency within 40 days, the matter is referred to the agency decision maker for further consideration, and to decide whether or not the case should be resubmitted to the panel.

If the case is submitted the Panel must give the case fresh consideration and make a recommendation. The agency decision maker will then take this into account when making their decision which is final.

Prospective adopters are also advised they can choose to have their case referred for consideration to the Independent Review Mechanism. If the Independent Review Mechanism process is used and there is a different view from the Review Panel about the suitability of the applicant, the Agency Decision-Maker must take account of this when a final decision is made. Prospective adopters will be notified in writing of the Agency decision as soon as possible after the final decision is made.

If prospective adopters believe they have been treated unfairly they would also have the right to use the Council's Complaints Procedure.

On approval prospective adopters are informed that they are now available to be considered for a potential match in-house with a child.

If a suitable in-house match is unavailable, approved adopters' permission is sought to forward their details to the National Adoption Register. They can also self-refer but their details will not be activated for three months to allow time for Gateshead Council Adoption Agency to propose a suitable match with a child(ren) locally.

After this period Regulations state adopter's details must go 'live' on the Register which means they may be considered for a suitable match from anywhere in the country.

Gateshead Council is a member of the Northern Region Consortium of Adoption Agencies. With the applicants' permission, after six months a profile could be compiled and circulated to fellow members of the consortium to establish whether an appropriate match can be found.

9.6 Support to Approved Adopters

Newly approved adopters will be allocated an Adoption Social Worker to act as their support worker. This will usually be the person who completed their assessment and with whom they already have a working relationship.

The support worker will assist the family as they consider potential matches. They will prepare them for a placement through regular phone contact and visits, together with invitations to post-approval training workshops and support groups.

Approved adopters who are waiting for a match with a child are formally reviewed on an annual basis. The Adoption Service Team Manager/Senior Practitioner and the Assessing Social Worker carry out the review with the prospective adopter. A report would be sent to the Adoption Panel if significant changes have taken place with regard to the adopter's circumstances or if approval is no longer felt to be appropriate by the agency. Any decision to withdraw approval is subject to the same review, appeal and complaints procedures as the initial agency decision to approve.

All prospective adopters are invited to attend the Waiting Adopters' Group which was set up by adoption agencies in the region for adopters who are approved but not yet matched. Adopters can come together to share experiences and identify issues which they would like more information on. Experienced adopters, foster carers and other professionals are invited to attend as guest speakers by the particular adoption agency whose turn it is to host the event.

Children referred for adoption are matched with prospective adopters on the basis of the needs of the child and the parenting capacity of the prospective adopters. In selecting a family the child's welfare throughout their life should be the paramount consideration.

In the event that several adopters equally have the assessed parenting capacity to meet a child's assessed needs, the prospective adopters who have been approved the longest will be considered initially for the match.

When considering a potential match with a child the adopters are supported by their Social Worker to have the fullest of information before deciding if they wish to proceed further.

Prospective adopters will receive written information about the child including family history, medical and education reports and also have the opportunity to meet the child's Social Worker, Foster Carer(s), Teacher(s) and the Agency Medical Adviser as part of the decision making process.

The support needs of prospective adopters are assessed as part of their Prospective Adopters Report. When a potential match is considered the child and the adopters support needs are incorporated into a support plan and this is reviewed as necessary.

All matches between a child and a prospective adoptive family are presented to the Adoption Panel. The adopters are also able to attend the matching Panel should they choose.

Once a match is agreed and approved by Panel and the Agency Decision Maker and the adopters have a child placed they are supported financially as follows:

- For each child placed adopters will receive a payment to cover the cost of the court fee that is payable when making the application to adopt. Any other practical or financial needs specific to the match would be considered as part of the individual support plan
- Some adopters and child(ren) are eligible for ongoing financial support through the payment of a regular weekly sum. This is subject to a standardised means test
- Accommodation, travel and subsistence expenses incurred during the introductions period are paid as per agency guidelines
- Following placement costs associated with contact arrangements may be paid

Adopters are given practical support to manage contact arrangements. The agency operates an indirect 'Post Box' system through which birth families and adoptive children and families can communicate if it is part of an agreed plan

If an adopter's Support Worker is not available they can access the Adoption Duty Worker during office hours or the Emergency Duty Team who offer out of hours support in an emergency

The Adoption Service continues to offer support to children and families beyond the making of an Adoption Order. Support can be accessed through the Adoption Service for the remainder of the child's life. All local authorities are required to identify an Adoption Support Services Adviser whose role is to give advice and information about support and facilitate joint working across authority boundaries. The LAC Service Manager is currently the Adoption Support Services Advisor for Gateshead.

If requested an assessment of support needs will be carried out and help given to access appropriate services if considered necessary.

Adoption support services are also available for birth families especially with regard to contact issues.

A counselling service is offered to all adult adoptees and tracing and reunification support can be provided.

An additional Adoption Support Service is currently offered on behalf of Gateshead Council by 'After Adoption'. After Adoption' provide independent support to all those involved in adoption, and also offer counselling, support and seminars. Birth families can receive specific support from 'After Adoption' through their 'Parents Without Children' project. Once a decision has been made that their child will not return to live with its birth family support can be provided throughout any court proceedings and will continue as long as it is needed by the individual birth family members.

10. Special Guardianship Orders – Assessment and Support

- 10.1 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the Special Guardianship Order as a permanence option for children, where adoption is not appropriate but the security of a legal arrangement is required. It gives parental responsibility to the Special Guardian, shared with the birth parents, but allows the Special Guardian to exercise parental responsibility to the exclusion of birth parents on most issues.
- 10.2 In the case of Looked After Children, the child's social worker is responsible for preparing and assessing applicants for Special Guardianship. In the case of non agency or Private Law applications, it is the responsibility of the Adoption Service.
- 10.3 There are specific policies and procedures within the Children and Families Service which outline the format and assessment process for Special Guardianship Support Services. The local authority should take into account similar services already being delivered in relation to adoption support and plan the provision of Special Guardianship support accordingly. Details of service for which individuals may be assessed are included in Appendix D.

11. Systems for Monitoring, Evaluating Service Provision

- 11.1 The Adoption Service is committed to providing services that are effective and which meet an appropriate standard. To ensure we meet these expectations there are a number of processes in place to assist us in monitoring and evaluating the service.
- 11.2 The Adoption Service is monitored at a strategic level by the use of key performance indicators for children's services, which measure the number of looked after children adopted during the year as a percentage of the looked after population and the timescale between identification at Panel and placement for adoption.
- 11.3 The Children's Services Senior Management Team meets regularly and with Team Managers to monitor performance in all areas of work against local and national targets to ensure the best outcomes are promoted for children unable to live within their families and adoption is seen as a real option.
- 11.4 The Adoption Service Annual Plan provides a framework to monitor, review and evaluate strategic direction and service provision.
- 11.5 The Cabinet and elected members receive reports covering the activity and development of the Adoption Service. Reports are also presented to the Scrutiny Committee as requested.

An elected member sits on the Adoption Panel and the Portfolio Holder for Looked After Children has been included in recruitment events. The Service Manager, LAC, also provides regular updates on performance and activity within the Adoption Service to portfolio holders.

- 11.6 The Adoption Panel plays a role in quality assurance. The Panel monitors timescales in line with National Standards for the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and the matching of children. Panel members complete feedback forms regarding the quality of information provided in reports on children and prospective adopters. The panel will make recommendations about the quality of information.

Quarterly progress reports are provided to the Adoption panel and there is internal monitoring reporting on the following:

- Children placed with adoptive families awaiting an adoption order

- Children identified for adoption awaiting a family
- Families approved as adopters awaiting placements
- Families undergoing training and assessment
- Children on referral for family finding
- Completion of an Annual Adoption Panel review. An annual report is written detailing the work of the Adoption Panel and is shared with the Panel, the Agency Decision Maker and other appropriate personnel

Additionally, the Panel Chair meets with the Panel Adviser and the Agency Decision Maker on a minimum quarterly basis to discuss the quality of information provided in reports on children and prospective adopters. There is also an annual training day for members of the Adoption Panel and the Adoption Service which helps ensure practice issues are addressed

11.7 Additional evaluation and monitoring takes place through:

- Learning from disruption meetings
- Feedback from prospective adopters and childrens' social workers
- Adopters provide views about the service through formal systems which includes written feedback, evaluation forms, quality control visits by the Team Manager, consultation events and questionnaires. An optional questionnaire is available following attendance at Panel. Feedback is used to review existing services and help develop new services
- Annual appraisal and development reviews for all Adoption Panel members, including the Panel Chair
- Complaints process
- Quarterly file audit system
- Supervision and annual appraisal
- Strategic development groups and managers meetings
- The Adoption Service meets regularly as a team providing opportunities to discuss and evaluate practice, systems and procedures

- All staff have access to relevant training opportunities to update and develop practice
- All children placed for adoption have regular reviews of their placement carried out by Independent Reviewing Officers
- The Adoption Service benchmarks itself through meetings with consortium members and the regional social work group
- Regular inspection of the Adoption Service will also ensure the required standards are met. Inspection reports are public documents and available on the relevant website

12. Equal Opportunities

- 12.1 The Agency abides by equal opportunities legislation and Council policy. The Adoption Service works positively and respectfully with all service users and partner agencies regardless of race, colour, religion, language, culture, disability, gender, sexual orientation or age.
- 12.2 Every attempt will be made to secure a placement which meets a child or young person's emotional and developmental needs taking into account their ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender and disability whilst taking into account the need to avoid undue delay.

13. Complaints

- 13.1 In seeking to improve the quality of the Adoption Service we welcome and encourage feedback from service users and partner agencies. All service users including children, adopters, prospective adopters, birth families and adult adoptees are able to utilise the Local Authority Complaints Procedure.
- 13.2 A 'Complaints/Comment/Compliments' leaflet which gives details of how to make a complaint, is given to every prospective adopter. The Children's Guide is given to all children who have a plan of adoption and contains details in it of how to make a complaint.
- 13.3 Our complaints procedure consists of three stages. A complaint can be resolved at anytime during the following stages.

Stage 1 – Problem Solving

When a complaint is made, the Adoption Service will try to deal with the complaint quickly and informally by providing information or taking appropriate action to the satisfaction of the customer. Informal resolution of complaints in this manner will not be recorded on the council's corporate complaints system but may be recorded in the Adoption Service's Information Systems.

Stage 2 – Investigation of the Complaint

If the complaint cannot be resolved immediately the complainant will receive a letter within three working days from the receipt of the complaint. This will tell them:

- What will be done in response to their complaint
- That their complaint will be dealt with within 20 working days, and if this is not possible, why not and a date when a full response will be available
- Who to contact about the complaint

Following the investigation, the complainant will receive the results in writing from a senior manager. If they are still unhappy, they can request a review of their complaint by the Chief Executive. This must be done within 10 working days of receiving the results.

Stage 3 – Review of the Complaint

If a complainant is still dissatisfied after Stage two, the complaint will be referred to the Chief Executive who will review both the handling and outcome of the complaint and provide a full response to the complainant within 20 working days unless agreed otherwise with the complainant.

A record is kept of all informal and formal complaints.

14. Useful Contact Numbers and Addresses

1. Adoption Service

Gateshead Council
Learning & Children
Services for Looked After Children
Council Offices
Prince Consort Road
Gateshead
NE8 4HJ

Telephone number: (0191) 433 8333
Website: www.gateshead.gov.uk

2. Birth Ties

Unit 112
Design Works
William Street
Felling
Gateshead
NE10 0JP

Telephone number: (0191) 438 7980
After Action Line 0800 0568578
Birth Ties Action line: 0800 840 2020

E-mail northeast@afteradoption.org.uk
Website: www.birth-ties.org.uk
www.afteradoption.org.uk

3. Social Care Complaints

Customer Services Unit
Civic Centre
Gateshead
NE8 1HH

Telephone number: (0191) 433 2407
Website: www.gateshead.gov.uk

4. Children and Young People's Right's Officer

Planning and Development
Civic Centre
Gateshead
NE8 1HH

Telephone number: (0191) 433 3000
Website: www.gateshead.gov.uk

5. Ofsted
Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA
Telephone number: 0845 6404045
Website: www.enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

6. British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)
Head Office
Skyline House
200 Union Street
London
SE OLX
Telephone number: 020 7593 2000
E-mail: mailbaaf.org.uk
Website: www.baaf.org.uk

7. BAAF Newcastle Office
MEA House
Ellison Place
Newcastle-upon-Tyne
NE1 8XS
Telephone number: (0191) 261 6600

8. Office of the Children's Right's Director
Ofsted
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE
Telephone number: (0800) 528 0731
Website: www.rights4me.org

15. **References**

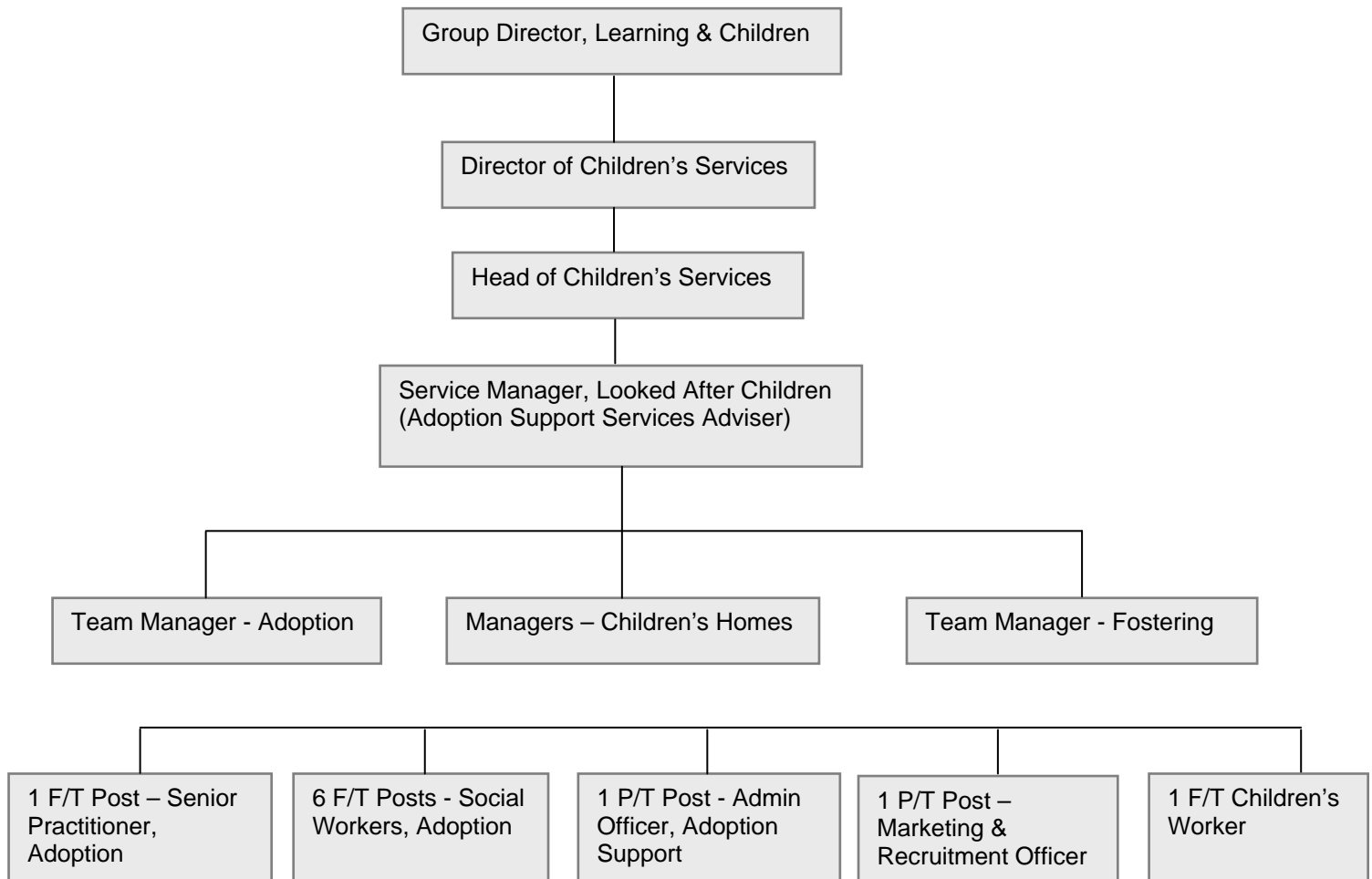
- Adoption Agency Regulations 2003
- National Adoption Standards for England (Department of Health 2001).
- Adoption Minimum Standards Regulations (Department of health 2003).
- Adoption and Children Act Guidance Children's Services Guidance.
- Department of Health.

Appendix B

Organisational Structure

Constitution of the Service

Current Management Structure is as follows:



All social work staff in the Adoption Team have at least three years Post-Qualifying experience and are registered as social work practitioners with the General Social Care Council.

“ Remaining appendices are available on request from the Adoption Service”