

Thurrock Adoption Agency Statement of Purpose



Our Vision for Thurrock:

We want Thurrock to be the dynamic heart of the Thames Gateway, a place of ambition, enterprise and opportunity, where communities and businesses flourish.

Achieving Our Vision:

To achieve our vision, we have identified five community priorities:

1. Create a great place for learning and opportunity.
2. Encourage and promote job creation and economic prosperity.
3. Build pride, responsibility and respect.
4. Improve health and well-being.
5. Promote and protect our clean and green environment.

Our aim:

Our aim is to become a confident, well managed and influential council regarded by residents, peers and partners as ambitious for the people of Thurrock and totally focused on meeting their current and future aspirations.

Four Pillars of the Children and Young Peoples plan

Excellent childcare, schools, colleges and services

- Raise attainment and promote engagement, resilience, active learning and economic wellbeing.
- Ensure high quality education training and services for children, young people and families.
- Ensure progression routes to higher level qualifications.

Everyone Succeeding

- Promote the attainment and achievement of under-achieving children
- Promote and support inclusion
- Reduce and mitigate the impact of child poverty and disadvantage.

Protection When Needed

- Build parental and family resilience
- Deliver outstanding services for children who have been or may be abused
- Commission or deliver outstanding services for disabled children, children in trouble and children in care

Lean and Fit for the Future

- Strong & resilient governance & leadership across the Children's Partnership & LSCB
- Strong organisational discipline
- Effective resource use through integrated strategic commissioning, capital and financial planning.

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1. Circulation

This policy/function has been circulated to:

Director People Services
Executive Head of Service – Care and Targeted Outcomes
Service Manager Throughcare
Service Manager Children with Disabilities
Service Manager Placements and Support Services
Service Manager Family Support Services
Service Manager Service Manager YOS and Targeted Youth Support
Service Manager Safeguarding and Child Protection Coordinator
Service Manager - Workforce Planning & Development
Team Manager Team for Disabled Children
Team Manager Youth Offending Team
Team Manager Adoption Team
Team Manager Initial Response Team
Team Managers Family Support Teams
Team Managers Throughcare Teams
Team Manager Permanency Team
Team Manager Adolescent Team
Team Manager Leaving Care & UAS Team
Team Manager Independent Reviewing Service
Team Manager Sunshine Centre

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Thurrock Borough Council undertakes the functions of an adoption agency in accordance with Government regulations and guidance. This Statement of Purpose has been prepared to meet the requirements of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 and the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011. It is reflected in the adoption service policies, procedures and guidance of the Council and its services.
- 1.2 The Statement of Purpose is approved by elected members of Thurrock Council and will be reviewed and revised annually.
- 1.3 It is available to:
- Members of staff
 - Prospective adopters
 - Approved adopters
 - Birth parents and relatives
 - Children (a children's guide to adoption is also available)
 - Members of the public
- 1.4 This document has been informed by:
- Adoption and Children Act 2002
 - Care Standards Act 2000
 - The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003
 - Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011
 - Children Act 2004
 - Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 as amended in 2011
 - The Adoption Support Agencies (England) and Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005
 - Adoption (Inter-country Aspects) Act 1999
 - Related Local Authority Circulars and Practice Guidance
 - Every Child Matters 2003.
 - Children and Families Act 2014
- 1.5 An online version of this document is available on Thurrock's Adoption website (link)

2 Values and principles

2.1 The Thurrock Adoption Service endorses the values underpinning the National Adoption Minimum Standards in setting service objectives and strives to promote the following values and principles:

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their developmental needs during childhood and beyond. Where possible this should be with their birth family, but where this is not consistent with their welfare every effort will be made to secure an alternative stable home where the child will feel loved and valued.
- Adopted children deserve the best experiences in life, from excellent parenting and education to a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents, skills and interests, in order to have an enjoyable childhood and successful adult life. Stable placements, emotional wellbeing and support are essential elements of this success.
- The child's welfare, safety and needs will be at the centre of the adoption process.
- Children's wishes and feelings are important and will be actively sought and fully taken into account at all stages.
- A sense of identity is important to a child's wellbeing. To help children develop this, their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language is fully recognised and positively valued and promoted. Disabled children and children with complex needs may have particular needs which should be fully recognised and taken into account.
- Delays in making decisions and in placing children with a family who can meet their developmental needs can have a severe impact on the health and development of children and should be avoided where possible.
- Where a child cannot be cared for in a suitable manner in his or her own country, inter-country adoption may be considered as an alternative means of providing a permanent family.
- Children, birth parents/guardians and families and adoptive parents and families will be valued and respected.
- Services promote equal opportunities and do not discriminate against anyone on the grounds of their age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnic origin, religion or culture.
- The service will maintain a commitment to learning, being outward looking, flexible, adapting to new ideas and ways of working and being responsive to individual need.
- A genuine partnership between all those involved in adoption is essential for the National Minimum Standards to deliver the best outcomes for children; this includes the Government, local government, other statutory agencies, Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Support Agencies.

- The Thurrock Adoption Service adheres to the principle of providing an efficient adoption service that works within current legislation, the budget set by Thurrock Council and the Corporate Plan, which puts the people of Thurrock at the heart of its services.

3 Aims and Objectives of the Adoption Service

3.1 Aims

The aim of the service is to safeguard, support and promote the best interests of children through the provision of adoption services that ensure permanent, secure and effective care for children who need adoption. At the same time, to ensure that other parties to the lifelong adoption process will have their needs identified and met, as far as is possible. Our purpose is:

- To provide the best possible placements for children and young people to enable them to reach their full potential.
- To recruit sufficient adopters to ensure that children can be placed with a family that best meets the child's needs, taking into account their holistic needs and the potential families available within a timeframe appropriate to the child's age and circumstances.
- To allocate resources within an agreed financial framework that meets the needs of children, young people and their families promoting best outcomes.

3.2. Objectives

Thurrock Adoption Agency will provide an adoption service to the community by working with partner organisations including Coram Capital Adoption in respect of domestic adoption and in respect of inter-country adoption.

- Match and place children with adopters who can best meet their assessed needs throughout childhood and beyond.
- Prepare children prior to introduction and placement with adopters in an age appropriate way so that children have information and an understanding of their history, the reasons for their placement for adoption and what adoption means.
- Secure a range of placements via Coram Capital Adoption and where appropriate via other adoption agencies / the National Adoption Register. Coram Capital will recruit, prepare, assess and approve adoptive applicants who can meet the needs of children who require adoption placement. This includes specific targeted recruitment of adopters for older children, sibling groups, children with disabilities, those with other special needs and children from diverse ethnic communities.
- Provide adoptive families who can support children who need to retain contact with siblings or significant people from their past.

- Ensure that enquirers about adoption receive full information on the adoption process so that they can make an informed judgement about whether or not to proceed with their application.
- Undertake full and appropriate assessments of prospective adopters and children for consideration by the Adoption Panel.
- Provide a range of adoption services, either directly, or through contractual arrangements, for adopted children and their adoptive families. These services include the provision of financial support where appropriate to facilitate adoption placements and a reviewed adoption support plan for every child placed for adoption.
- Provide a post adoption support service that will assess the adoption support needs of families and people affected by adoption and identify sources of support.
- Work with birth parents to help enable them to continue to play an active role in the decision making for their children. This includes access to independent information and support once adoption is identified as a plan.
- Provide a Letterbox Scheme for adopted children and members of their birth family where there is an identified and agreed plan for indirect contact.
- Provide Inter-country adoption services for people who live in the UK and wish to adopt from overseas, foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care and step-parents or relatives wishing to adopt a child within their family. Facilitate the provision of continuing direct contact between adopted children and members of their birth family or significant people from their past if this is the agreed plan.
- Provide counselling and information from adoption records to adopted adults, birth family members following the making of the adoption order, and advice and assistance on contact, tracing and accessing adoption records.
- Provide advice and guidance to birth family members or significant people from the past where a child has been adopted, to enable them to access services in relation to adoption issues from appropriate agencies.

3.3 How will this happen?

All services provided directly or by contract will adhere to the aims and objectives and are achieved by:

- Providing placement choices that reflect:
 - Equality
 - Diversity
 - Individual and personal needs
 - Social and cultural background preferences
- Delivering local placements wherever possible and appropriate to allow ongoing post-adoption support
- Active leadership that delivers clarity of purpose to the adoption service

- Assessing the needs of the child/ren in order to identify appropriate adopter/s
- Providing access to support services (e.g. health, therapy) for children, and adopters.
- Facilitating the maintenance of valued relationships, where appropriate, especially with siblings and anyone identified by the child and birth family where possible.
- Avoiding drift and working with time scales that meet the child's best interests
- Designing and managing effective processes and ways of working
- Joint working and partnership
- Ensuring that staff are trained and motivated to deliver a child centred service
- Learning in order to deliver continuous improvement through:
 - The assessment and review of the service
 - Seeking feedback form adoptive parents and users
 - Responding positively to complaints and feedback
 - Learning from any placement disruptions
- Involving children in policy and decision making
- Providing appropriate and pro-active support and guidance to birth parents.
- Ensuring that children's wishes and feelings will be actively sought and fully taken into account at all stages
- Taking corporate responsibility within Thurrock Children's Services and Health for the effective management, quality and support of placements
- Being vigorous in challenging poor practice and addressing problems effectively.

3.4 There are detailed adoption policies and procedures to guide the way in which the objectives are achieved. These cover children, adopters, birth families, adoption support, non-agency adoption and inter country adoption. New staff are given a copy of the adoption policies and informed of any changes. Adoption panel members have a copy of the panel Policy and Procedures. There is also a complete range of more general Thurrock Council's policies including Thurrock's Safeguarding policy, which all staff first access as part of their induction.

4 The systems in place to support, monitor and evaluate

4.1 Thurrock Council has a three year partnership contract from September 2015 with Coram Capital Adoption an agency with the Thomas Coram Foundation, outstanding in the delivery of adoption services. Coram Capital Adoption is operated from the Coram Central Adoption Team with co-location of staff in Thurrock. The aim is to facilitate an integrated programme of activity to optimise adoption outcomes for children by the management and delivery of services related to the recruitment, assessment, approval

and training of adopters services with a gateway to Coram Capital Adoption for continuing support.

- 4.2 The quality assurance of the service is dually achieved by contract to Coram and specified quality assurance systems reporting to the Council on data and quality assurance at agreed intervals and to assist the Council in its overall monitoring and reporting on outcomes of the services and performance against statutory requirements.
- 4.3 Statistical records are kept of all the adoption service's activities. These are analysed to evaluate and monitor the service and to ensure that children's plans are moving forward within timescales that meet their needs and are within the timescales of the National Adoption Minimum Standards. Monitoring is also undertaken to provide information on the needs of children requiring adoption, the numbers of adopters required and to ensure sufficient staff members are available to provide an effective and efficient service. Aspects of this process include:
- Collection and scrutiny of data, recording outcomes for children and adopters.
 - Tracking systems to measure the timescales for providing services.
 - Review of service outcomes for checking against key performance indicators and national standards.
 - Team meetings and training sessions that focus on any identified gaps in performance.
 - Statutory reviews and planning meetings that provide a structure for the agency to record progress in individual cases.
 - The routine monitoring of staff performance is during regular supervision sessions, annual Performance and Development Reviews, and bi-annual Competency Reviews with line managers.
 - Elected Members oversee the Service's performance through Adoption Agency Reports presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee Pre-agenda quality assurance meeting for Adoption Panel reports.
 - Written quality assurance feedback from the Adoption Panel at the end of each Panel meeting.
 - Communication and meetings between the Panel Chair, agency managers and the decision-maker.
 - Collective scrutiny of practice in areas such as recruitment, preparation and assessment standards.
- 4.4 Systems for feedback and evaluation from the following groups are in place:
- Initial information given to enquirers and the time taken to respond to Adopters' experience of introductions, placement and the information given on the child.
 - Adoption Panel attendance feedback
 - Birth parent(s) and birth families and the service they have received.
 - Where they are of an age to understand and communicate, the views of children placed for adoption.

- Inter-country adopters and the service they have received.
- Non-agency adopters, e.g. step-parents and relatives, and the service they have received.
- Schedule 2 users (birth record counselling and adult adoptees) and the service they received.

5 Management structures and staff details

5.1 The Thurrock Adoption Service and its partner Coram Capital Adoption are committed to monitoring the quality of services and the outcomes of placements and collect data that measures the service's performance. These indicators are monitored through the Thurrock Children's Services management structure, with quality assurance oversight being carried out in accordance with the Council's Quality Assurance framework.

5.2 The Adoption Team is part of the Directorate of Children's Services. The Director is Carmel Littleton. Andrew Carter, Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes, is the Adoption Agency Decision Maker. The Service Manager, Placement and Support Service, provides the direct management lead for the Adoption Service. In the absence of the nominated manager (the Adoption Team Manager), the Service Manager, Placement and Support Service takes responsibility for that role.

See Appendix 1 for the Structure Chart of the Service

5.3 The Adoption Team social workers and contracted social workers have relevant qualifications, usually a DipSW, CQSW or Degree in Social Work and are registered with the HCPC the professional regulator for social work, who is appointed by interview in accordance with equal opportunities good practice and human resources recruitment policy. Copies of staff qualifications, references and checks are kept on Personnel files for inspection and oversight by the appropriate inspectors and managers. Regular supervision, training and annual employee development appraisals are conducted.

5.4 Social Workers preparing reports in relation to prospective adopters, adoption placements or other adoption specific reports are required to have suitable post qualifying experience in child care work (including direct experience of adoption work) and will be supervised by a manager with expertise in adoption and family placement work. All social workers within the team are suitably qualified with experience in varying degrees of children and families social work and fostering or adoption.

5.5 Thurrock Children's Services strives to be a learning organisation and Adoption Service staff have access to the full range of training opportunities as other Social Work staff, as well as more focused training where appropriate. Those staff working in the field of adoption will also have access to training via Coram Capital Adoption.

- 5.6 Through supervision, annual performance appraisal, development interviews and specialist training, the Adoption Service ensures that staff have the skills and knowledge to work effectively in the complex field of adoption practice whilst keeping up to date with safeguarding and general children's services issues. The adoption administrator undertakes relevant training such as the CoramBAAF 'Role of Panel Administrators'. All staff receive updated annual Safeguarding training.
- 5.7 The staff team joins with Adoption Panel members in joint training which features input from external speakers.
- 5.8 The Adoption Team consists of an Adoption Partnership Manager and Senior Practitioner appointed by Coram Capital Adoption and based in Thurrock who link in to Coram Capital Adoption; and Thurrock staff who are responsible for adoption related tasks including family finding, inter-country adoption, life story work, and letterbox contact. Administrative support is provided by an Adoption Administrator, whose work is covered by administrative staff from the Fostering Service in her absence. We also currently have a temporary part-time Administrator.

6 Services Provided

6.1 The Adoption Service provided by Thurrock in Partnership with Coram Capital covers all areas of adoption including recruitment, assessment and training of prospective adopters, preparation of children for placement, counselling of adopted adults, step-parent adoptions, birth parent counselling and inter country adoptions.

6.2 Who receives Adoption Services?

- Children requiring adoption
- Birth relatives
- Prospective adopters
- Approved adopters
- Children and their adoptive families who need adoption support
- Adopted adults and members of their birth families

6.3. What services are provided?

6.3.1 The Coram Capital Adoption Partnership provides adoptive families for Thurrock children, as well those from elsewhere through Inter Agency

- 6.3.2. Thurrock has access to a commissioned service delivered via the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Titled the Thurrock Targeted Therapeutic Support Service, this is a Child and Adolescent Mental Health tier two service, for specific groups of young people and their carers, this includes children placed for Permanency through adoption, Special Guardianship Orders, etc.
- 6.3.3. Specialist education advice and support is available through the Head of the Virtual School for children looked after until the making of an adoption order and beyond if the family reside in Thurrock.
- 6.3.4. Specialist Health support and advice for Looked After Children is available through the Looked After Children Nurse and Consultant Community Paediatrician, until the making of an adoption order.
- 6.3.5. Adopters are supported through the process of adoption by the allocation of an adoption Social Worker by Coram Capital, usually the worker who has completed their assessment with them. They are in regular touch by telephone, email and visits (office or home based) pre placement. Post placement visits are weekly or fortnightly till the first review, three weekly till the second review, monthly till the third review and thereafter a minimum of 6 weekly – 2 monthly. Visits will be more frequent if needed. The adopter's support worker is responsible for advising on the linking & matching of placements, practical support and advice to adopters, acting as a key liaison person with the child's social worker and completing relevant sections of reports for the Court.
- 6.3.6. A post approval group which is run by Thurrock meets on a quarterly basis for approved adopters awaiting placement to offer ongoing training and to share profiles of children needing adoption.
- 6.3.7. A post adoption support group meets run by Thurrock on a quarterly basis, which looks at issues such as managing difficult behaviour, the effects of separation and loss, and life story work as well as offering a Christmas Party and other social events throughout the year.
- 6.3.8. We strive to ensure new adopters are aware of universal services and supports available from our local Children's Centres, so that new adopters can confidently make use of the same services as other new parents. This is a service we would make available to any new adopters living within Thurrock, irrespective of the placing agency.
- 6.3.9. Any families living in the Thurrock area whose lives are affected by adoption are able to apply to the Thurrock Adoption Service and request an

assessment of need. This will be undertaken by a qualified adoption social worker to identify support available to the family or person concerned.

6.3.10 Thurrock Adoption Team has full membership of CoramBAAF where adopters can gain additional support and advice. Thurrock has a direct link with a local Coram family project to provide support where appropriate, and will consider a range of other specialist resources when needed.

6.4. Recruitment of Adopters

6.4.1. Coram Capital Adoption undertakes the marketing and recruitment of adopters process as well as stage 1 and stage 2 assessments. This enlarges the pool of adopters available for Thurrock's children while maintaining a local presence in attracting new adopters. We are members of the North East London Adoption Consortium and engage fully in best practices in finding the right families for our children at the right time to meet their needs.

6.4.2. Coram Capital Adoption will recruit a wide range of adopters within Thurrock as well as within a 35 mile radius of the Coram Campus to meet the diverse needs of children in Thurrock who need adoptive families,

6.4.3. Enquirers for adoption will be referred to Coram Capital Adoption who will provide telephone information, an information pack within five days, and for those who wish to proceed, an interview will be offered within 10 days as well as information about the next information meeting. The Coram Capital Adoption website is welcoming and informative and has a link to Thurrock Council's website which likewise refers potential adoption enquirers to the Coram Capital Adoption website and to First 4 Adoption, the national gateway for prospective adopters.

6.4.5. It is explained to those who enquire that priority will be given to applicants who are able to meet the needs of the children currently awaiting adoption. This can change at any given time but usually we need adopters for older children and sibling groups, children with disabilities and children from minority ethnic groups. It may not be practicable to assess everyone who cannot meet the needs of children currently needing placement.

6.4.6. Key Aims of the Recruitment Strategy;

- Recruit a variety of adopters to meet the ever-changing needs of children in Thurrock requiring placements.

- Attract adopters from black and ethnic minority communities, those interested in taking older children, those with disabilities and larger sibling groups.
- Increase stability of adoptive placements through appropriate support packages.
- To provide a choice of placements to match the needs of children and young people thereby decreasing the possibility of disruption.

6.4.7. Recruitment and assessment of adopters is the responsibility of Coram Capital Adoption and is carried out in line with the two Stage assessment process. Reports on Prospective Adopters are presented to the Coram Capital Panel. Post approval support in seeking a match will be provided by Coram Capital Adoption.

6.5. Adoptive applicants

6.5.1. Adoptive applicants are sought from all sections of the community: married people; couples living together, single people, same sex partnerships and members of the diverse ethnic, cultural and religious groups, in order to meet the diverse needs of children in this area.

6.5.5. People who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and referred to Coram Capital Adoption where they will be given clear information about recruitment, assessment and approval. They will be treated fairly throughout the adoption process. Thurrock Adoption Agency has a policy of not placing children under the age of 5 years with adopters who smoke and this will be made clear at the outset. Adopters are deemed to be a non-smoker when they have given up smoking for a period of twelve months or more.

6.6 Inter- country adopters.

6.6.1 Thurrock Adoption Agency believes that with inter-country adoptions, as with all other adoptions, the child's needs are paramount. We will provide initial written information and counselling to applicants seeking to adopt a child from another country and offer advice on how further specific information regarding the legal and good practice arrangements for adoption in a particular country might be obtained. As is usual national practice, the Agency will charge a fee for the statutory assessment and approval process.

6.6.2. The application and post approval support services will operate to the same standards as for domestic adoptions. (For further information see Adoption Agency Statement of Purpose)

6.7 Post Approval

- 6.7.1 Adopters approved by Coram Capital will review approved adopters at least every twelve months whilst on the register and continue to provide advice, support and counselling.
 - 6.7.2 Every effort will be made to match the applicants with a suitable child or children. Approved adopters will be informed of the National Adoption Register and the Partners in Adoption consortium arrangements.
 - 6.7.3 Prospective adopters receive preparation for a child being placed when they attend the preparation course and during their assessment.
- 7.1 Placements of Thurrock Children
- 7.1.1. When a link with a particular child or children has been agreed at the linking meeting, the adoption social worker and child's social worker will tell the prospective adopter about the child and give some written information. If the prospective adopters wish to proceed, they will receive further detailed information including the child's permanence report. Arrangements will be made for them to meet the child's foster carers and any other key people.
 - 7.1.2 All prospective adoptive parents who are linked with children referred by Thurrock Council will have the opportunity to meet with the medical adviser prior to the matching adoption panel, but particularly where children have special needs.
 - 7.1.3 Where the child's case has been considered by a Court, leave of the court will have been sought to disclose specialist written reports about the child that may help adopters.
 - 7.1.4 The Agency (Thurrock) is committed to developing a comprehensive range of services aimed to support adoptees, both as children and adults, prospective adopters and adopters in the periods before placement, after placement and post adoption. An Adoption Placement Report is prepared prior to Thurrock's adoption panel to make clear what support will be offered to the child and their new family. This will include services such as financial support, payment of legal expenses where agreed; referral to specialist local services; letterbox contact, ongoing training and a telephone helpline in addition to support services offered by Coram Capital Adoption..
 - 7.1.5 Following approval of the match at the full adoption panel, a placement planning meeting will be called. The Coram Capital Adoption Manager or a senior practitioner will chair this. The meeting includes the adopters, their social worker, the child's social worker, foster carer and the foster carers supervising social worker. The purpose of the meeting is to ensure that the adopters have all the relevant information available about the child. We provide the prospective adopters with a copy of the child's permanence report, matching report and the final agreed adoption support plan. An introduction programme is devised in consultation with the adopters.

7.1.6 After the child is placed with the adopters, the child's social worker and the adopter's social worker continue to support the placement. Where more in-depth work is needed, the child and prospective adopters can be referred to Coram Capital Adoption Support services as well as to Thurrock's in house services and those provided by other agencies as part of the adoption support plan.

7.1.7 Reviews are chaired by an independent reviewing officer until an adoption order is made. The review first considers the child's progress and then the adoption support plan and whether changes need to be made to it. Adopters are informed that they can make contact with the agency at any time in the future if they wish the adoption support plan to be reviewed.

7.2 Preparation for and placement of children

7.2.1 Placements for children are considered on the basis of seeking carers from within the child's family first (Connected Persons). If this is not possible, adopters from Coram Capital Adoption will be sought. If no suitable placement is available from within Coram's resources (including Coram Capital, Coram East Midlands and Coram Cambridgeshire), available, the Adoption Service will locate suitable adopter/s via the National Adoption Register or other external sources.

7.2.2 The Coram Adoption Partnership Manager receives requests for placements for adoption from social workers. The request is provided in writing and outlines the reasons for placement, care needs, ethnicity, religion and language and intended timescales, legal status, forum in which the decision for adoption or concurrent planning was made and any other key information that enables a suitable match to be found.

7.2.3 A needs meeting is then called, chaired by the Adoption Partnership Manager or Senior Practitioner and attended by the child's social worker and manager if possible, and the foster carer. The child's holistic needs including contact are discussed and the key qualities required in adopter/s are identified and timescales needed to achieve a placement discussed

7.2.4 Issues considered include sibling placements where relevant, and the children's separate needs identified. Whether the children should be placed together is discussed and if necessary a sibling assessment is requested.

7.2.5 Once a match has been identified, an Adoption Planning meeting then takes place to clarify what information is required for Thurrock's matching panel and by when and who will take responsibility for this. At this stage the Coram Capital Adoption team provides appropriate advice and guidance on adoption planning issues, so that the final local authority care plan is as well advised as possible.

7.2.6 Once it is clear that adoption has been identified as the primary plan, a child's permanence report is prepared. During this work it is ensured that:

- Children are carefully listened to where they are old enough.
- Children's views about their situation, in particular, who they live with in the future, and who they continue to have contact with, are recorded and actively taken into account at each stage.
- Children should receive support services that meet their assessed needs.
- Children should receive proper preparation for placement and support after placement.

7.2.7 Birth families' views about placements are sought and taken into account.

7.2.8 Every effort is made to find a placement, which meets the child's emotional and developmental needs. This takes into account their ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender, disability and other special needs as well as considerations regarding contact.

However, no child should experience undue delay and if no placement is available within an appropriate timescale, placements that cannot meet all these needs, but are sympathetic to them, will be positively considered.

7.2.9 The child is provided with a full and realistic family history and helped to maintain their heritage. A letter for later life is prepared and includes information about the child's family background and the reasons for the decisions which led to the child being adopted. The child's social worker writes this letter to be read by young adopted people when in adolescence or early adulthood, with the support of their adoptive parent/s.

7.2.10 Social workers, foster carers and others staff work to prepare children for adoptive placement. Work is undertaken with children in regard to their wishes and feelings about adoption and the kind of family they would ideally like to live with.

7.2.11 When a family has been matched, children are given appropriate information about their new family in a format they can understand. This often includes welcome books including photos and DVD's, prepared by the prospective adopters.

7.2.12 Post placement the social worker continues to support the child in placement. However if more in depth or specialist work is needed, we will arrange this within Thurrock or via Coram Capital Adoption or we will access consortium resources. If required we will refer the child and prospective adopter to external specialist services.

7.4 .Birth families - Support, information and counselling for birth parents

- 7.4.1 Birth parents and birth families are entitled to services that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption. Birth parents will be informed and consulted at the earliest stage when the agency has decided parallel plans, which include adoption. They will have the opportunity to give their account of events and to see and comment on what is written about them in reports for the Adoption Panel and in information passed to adopters.
- 7.4.2 Birth Parents will be offered a worker from the Adoption Team to advise and support them throughout the adoption process. If requested, this service can be purchased independently.
- 7.4.3 The Agency will provide a service for birth parents who wish to relinquish their child for adoption, usually babies. When the agency is approached before the child's anticipated birth, as much preliminary work as possible will be undertaken with the birth parents before the child is born, to ensure that the decision to place for adoption is based on the fullest possible consideration of all the alternatives available.
- 7.4.4 If a birth parent requests adoption for their child, a PPM will be convened without delay to ensure that planning is thorough and timely; that the parent/s are given full information and offered appropriate support to keep their child if they wish, and that full information is provided to the parents and any relatives identified by the parents as potential carers.
- 7.4.5 Prospective adopters will be identified without delay and provided with full information about the child and counselling re the nature of the placement and potential legal uncertainties.
- 7.4.6 All birth parents will be encouraged to provide information and contribute to their child's life storybook and letter for later life. The life storybook provides a simple and age appropriate explanation of what has happened to the child up until they join their adopted family and why the decision to place the child for adoption was made. It includes pictures of important people and places in the child's life so far, mementoes and other information relevant to the child. The child's social worker usually does this work with help and advice from the adoption worker.

7.5 Financial Support and other Support Arrangements

- 7.5.1 For placements in respect of a child who is looked after by Thurrock. Thurrock is able to pay introductory expenses and will meet costs of legal expenses where the adoption is contested or particularly complex. Applicant's court fees for an adoption application are paid.
- 7.5.2 At the point of matching, all children must have an adoption support plan, which highlights any financial implications. Adopters are provided with a leaflet setting out what benefits they may be entitled to. When all possible benefits have been claimed and if there is still a financial need, Thurrock assesses whether it should assist. The adoption support plan must be

agreed by the Adoption Services Support Adviser and with the adoptive family before being presented to the Adoption Panel.

7.5.3 Subsequently, the child's and the adopters' circumstances will need to be reassessed before any help is offered. Where there is a specific need for financial help related to the placement for adoption and subject to means testing (which is required by government regulations), Thurrock will consider assisting adopters before and after the child is adopted. This support is available to any adopter living in the Thurrock area, whether the child has been placed by Thurrock or not.

7.5.4 Unless the circumstances are exceptional, most financial help given will be in the form of a one off rather than regular payments. One exception is where existing foster carers are adopting, where Thurrock Borough Council will agree to regular payments for a period of up to two years, or longer if circumstances indicate that adoption would otherwise not be possible.

7.6 Making, maintaining and reviewing Contact Plans

7.6.1 Thurrock recognises the importance of children and young people having suitable contact with their birth families and other significant people. Such contact is entirely governed by the best interests of the children. Contact can vary from the annual exchange of written information to face-to-face contact with members of the birth family at intervals appropriate for the child.

7.6.2. The agency operates a letterbox contact scheme for the exchange of information between adoptive families and birth families whilst maintaining confidentiality about identities and addresses of the parties concerned. Birth families are also supported in arrangements for letterbox and direct face-to-face contact with the child by adoption support social workers.

7.6.3 There are usually mutual benefits from holding at least one meeting between the child's birth parent and the adoptive parents around the time of introductions. Other significant birth relatives may also be involved. After placement contact arrangements continue to be revisited at each review, but there are no further reviews after an adoption order is made. If there are any issues that arise later, these may be addressed through the adoption support social workers.

7.7 What happens if placements break down?

7.7.1 Very few Thurrock placements for children do disrupt. However, where there is a disruption Thurrock will convene a disruption meeting in order to try to understand the factors which led to the breakdown of the placement. This helps in planning future placements. These meetings are chaired by an Independent Chairperson. A summary of the conclusions of this meeting are considered by the management team, with the Adoption Panel and with Coram Capital Adsorption to inform future practice.

8. Step-parent adoption

- 8.1 The Adoption Service also provides advice, information and counselling for those who are seeking to secure the adoption of their partner's children. The same service will be provided for adoption by relatives.
- 8.2 Enquirers are sent written information about non agency adoption within 5 working days. If having read the information families wish to proceed, they are asked to apply in writing. The Agency needs to undertake statutory checks and enquiries in the same way as any other application. These applications may be referred to Coram Capital Adoption for assessment.
- 8.3 The assessing social worker will provide a detailed report for the court having considered all alternatives to adoption with the applicants. Thurrock has a duty to only recommend adoption where it is in the best interests of the child for an order to be made.
- 8.4 In order to assess whether adoption is in the best interests of the child, it is necessary to seek the child's own views and the views of the birth parent who is not making the application. Similarly the views of wider family members will be taken into consideration where appropriate.

9. Services for Adopted Adults

- 9.1 The team offers counselling and can act as an intermediary with the birth family where adoptees over the age of 18 years contact the Adoption Service seeking information or seeking contact with their birth family. This includes those seeking access to their adoption records, referred to the team by the General Register Office.
- 9.2 This service is available both to those adults adopted through this Agency and those living in this area whose adoptions were arranged through other Adoption agencies.
- 9.3 Where adoptees are under the age of 18 and are seeking further information and possible contact with the birth family, the agency will offer counselling and act as an intermediary, taking into account the views of the adoptive family.

10 Birth Relative Initiated Contact

- 10.1 Requests from adult birth family members for help seeking information or making contact with adult adoptees, placed by Thurrock, will be facilitated by the team, who will act as an intermediary, firstly checking with the Adoption Contact Register whether the adult adoptee has lodged a veto with the register. If no veto has been placed, the social worker will check the records for the adoption to ascertain whether there might be any potential counter-indications to contacting the adoptee – e.g. a history of abuse by the relative - as the welfare of the adopted child throughout his/her life remains the paramount consideration. If there is no counter-indication, the social worker will approach the adult adoptee if his/her whereabouts can be found.
- 10.2 Recognising the potential impact that this work may have upon the adopted person, any separated siblings and other involved people; the work will be guided by the following general principles:
- The welfare, safety, needs, current circumstances and wishes of the adopted adult and others involved will inform any work undertaken.
 - The role of the team shall be to assist the birth relative to understand and accept the situation they are in and the choices open to them, not to advocate on their behalf.

11 Equal Opportunities

The Adoption Service is committed to working in an anti-discriminatory way, incorporating the Council's Single Equalities Policy in all its work, ensuring services to children meet their individual needs such as racial and cultural identity, religious and linguistic needs, disability, gender and sexuality. The service endeavours to make a positive commitment to address these needs and promote respect and celebrate difference.

12 Child Protection

The Service complies with the Thurrock Safeguarding Board policy and the Southend, Essex and Thurrock (SET) child protection procedures in all areas of child protection. The Service will provide adequate training to its staff and adopters to ensure that children are safeguarded and protected at all times.

13 Adoption Panel

- 13.1.1 The Thurrock Adoption Panel is compliant with the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011), relevant guidance and National Minimum Standards. The panel has a Policy and Procedures document. Thurrock has a 'central list' of people with wide range of experience and diverse backgrounds who are able to serve on Panel. Most are appointed to the panel on a regular basis, although there are others who are able to bring particular experience and perspectives who are available for appointment when required. The panel operates at sufficient frequency to avoid delay in

considering applications regarding children who are relinquished for adoption and matching children with suitable prospective adopters. There are scheduled monthly meetings with additional meetings arranged as necessary.

13.1.2 Thurrock's Adoption Agency provides suitable training and development opportunities for all those on the central list. Each member has an annual performance review.

13.1.3 The panel is there to make recommendations to the agency on the main issue -

- Whether a match for a child with a particular adopter is right for them
- Whether to accept an adoption plan in respect of a child whose parent/s have applied to relinquish him/her for adoption

13.1.4 It also advises on –

- Adoption Support Plans
- Contact arrangements
- Issues of concern, which they feel the Agency needs to address.

13.1.5 The panel has an independent and suitably qualified independent chairperson Tony Sharp, who was appointed in early 2014. We have an independent vice-chair who will stand in as required and we will, as is now permitted, appoint a second vice chair so that there can never be any problem in holding an urgent meeting due to lack of an authorised chairperson. Adoption panels make recommendations not decisions. The main Agency Decision Maker is Andrew Carter, Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes. He has overall responsibility for services for looked after children in Thurrock

13.1.6 Although now a legal requirement, Thurrock adoption panel has since its inception in 1998, always invited prospective adopters to attend the panel when their approval is being considered. Approved prospective adopters are invited when the panel considers a proposal that a child is matched with them for adoption.

13.1.7 The panel always gives reasons for its recommendations and these are recorded in the panel minutes. When approved prospective adopters attend matching panel, they are directly informed at the meeting what the recommendation is in most cases, otherwise within 24 hours.

13.1.8 The panel minutes and recommendations are prepared promptly, circulated to panel members for comment and then given final authorisation by the panel chair before being presented to the decision maker. We aim to complete this process within seven working days when at all possible. The Decision Maker will reach their decision within seven working days of receiving the minutes and recommendations.

14 Storage, access, maintenance and security of adoption records

The Thurrock Adoption Service acknowledges the need to ensure all records are maintained in accordance with the Disclosure of Adoption Information (Post-Commencement Adoptions) Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards for Adoption. The indexes to all adoption case records are kept for at least 100 years, and where the case concerns a placement resulting in an Adoption Order being made, the related case papers are kept for 100 years from the date of the making of an Adoption Order. All other records are retained in line with the Thurrock Council Policy on Record Retention and Destruction. All requests for access to closed adoption files must be made through the Service Manager, Placements and Support, and the Adoption Team Manager will maintain a log of all requests. All files are held in lockable, secure storage. Where records are not held within premises owned and managed by Thurrock Council a contract is in place with 1 Big Self Store Limited to ensure that the records are held under conditions that are fit for purpose.

15 Complaints procedures

Complaints about adoption fall into two categories as follows:

(a). Where the complaint is related to the service received, this is dealt with in accordance with Section 26 of the Children Act 1989, and the procedures on complaints for the Thurrock Council's Department of Children Education and Families.

A service user or somebody acting on their behalf can make a complaint by contacting:

Harminder Dhillon
Compliments and Complaints Manager for Children's Services
Thurrock Council
Civic Offices
New Road
Grays
Essex
RM17 6SL

(b) Where complaints relate to the service provided to prospective adoptive parents or adopters by Coram Capital Adoption acting on behalf of Thurrock Council, the complaint should be directed to:

Christine Kelly
Complaints Manager
Coram Campus

41 Brunswick Square,
London WC1Z2QA

Thurrock Council Adoption Agency is registered with:

OFSTED

National Business Unit

Piccadilly Gate

Store Street

Manchester

M1 2WD

0300 123 1231

enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

9. Approval of the Statement of Purpose

The Statement of Purpose will be updated annually and approved by the Lead Member. It will then be presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE CHART

