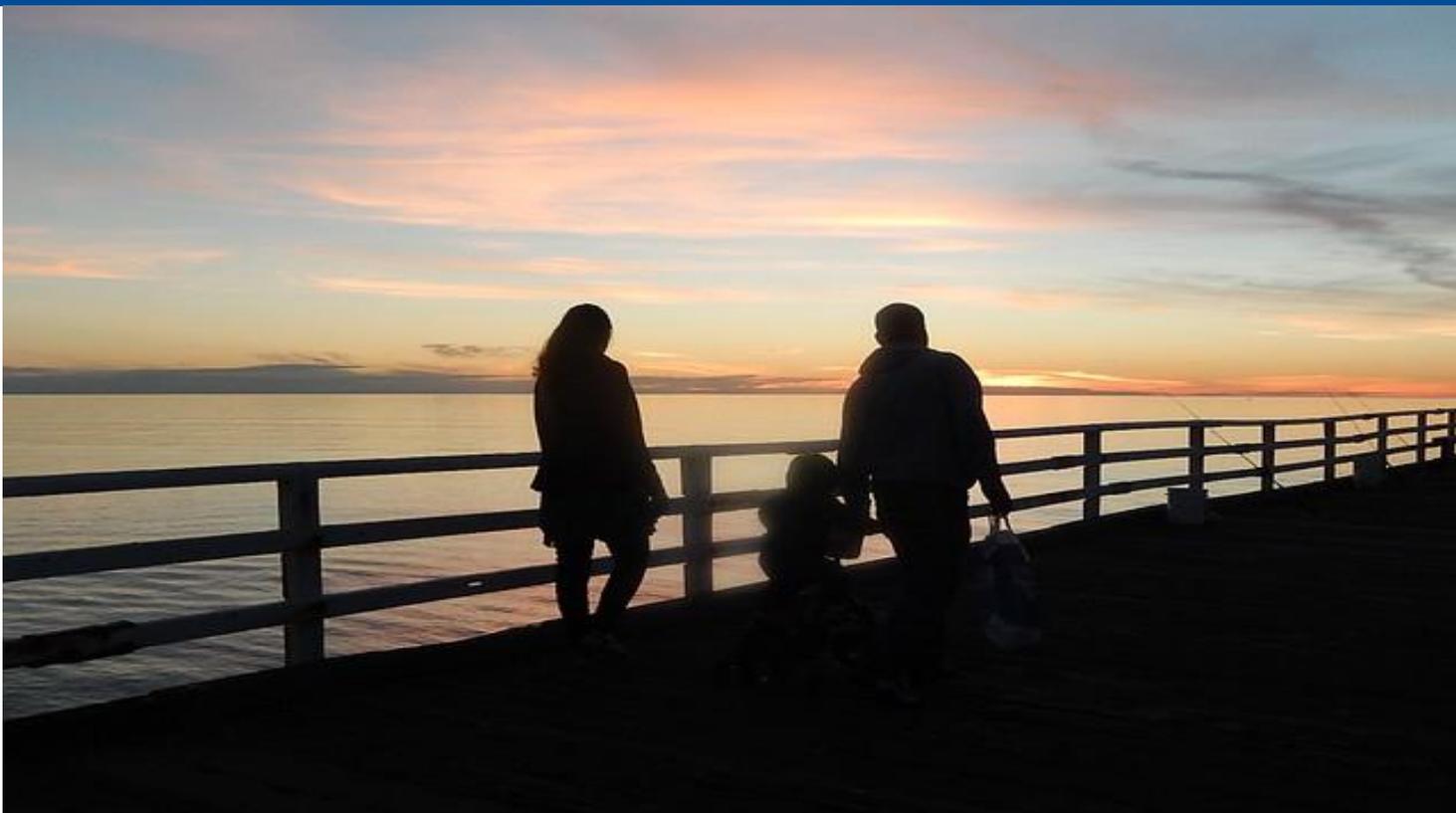


Adoption Service Statement of Purpose

Southend on Sea Borough Council



Department of Children and Public Health

Southend Adoption Service
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Introduction

The following Statement of Purpose is intended to set out clearly the aims and objectives of the Southend Adoption Agency as required by;

- Schedule I of the Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2003 (amended 2005, 2013 and 2014), and
- the Adoption Agencies regulations 2005, amended by the Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations (Amendment) Regulations 2011, and
- the Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential amendments) Regulations 2012, and
- the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011.

As required under these Regulations, the Statement of Purpose will be presented to the Council's Cabinet for endorsement and will be reviewed and updated annually.

The Statement of Purpose will take into account the following:

- The Southend Adoption Agency Policy Document
- The Adoption Act 1976 as amended by Adoption & Children Act 2002
- The Local Authority Adoption Agencies (England) Regulations 2003 (amended 2005 & 2013 & 2014)
- The Care Standards Act 2000
- The National Minimum Standards for Local Authority Adoption Services in England and Wales 2011
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002
- The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 – amended 2011
- Children and Adoption Act 2006
- Children and Families Act 2014
- Adoption: Statutory Guidance
- Adoption Scorecard
- Southend Corporate Parenting Strategy
- Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020

Aims and Objectives

Southend Sea Borough Council Adoption Service aims to provide a comprehensive range of adoption services to children requiring adoption, birth families, adopters and those who have already been adopted. In meeting its aims and objectives, the Adoption Service will work within the relevant policies of both Southend Borough Council and the Adoption Service.

The objective of Children's Services is for every child to remain with their birth family and every reasonable effort will be made by the Authority to enable and support the birth parents, or the wider birth family, to provide a permanent home for the child where the child's needs can be met within a safe environment. However, if this is not possible then the child is entitled to grow up as part of a loving, adoptive family that can meet their needs during childhood and beyond. At all times the child's best interests come first with their welfare and safety being paramount.

The Adoption Service aims to recruit sufficient adopters to ensure that children can be placed with a family that not only meet the child's day to day needs but also the ethnic, cultural, religious, physical and emotional needs of the child. However, no child should wait indefinitely for an ideal placement.

The Adoption Service recognises the importance of a child retaining some form of contact with their birth parent(s) or birth family. Any decision about the possibility, type and frequency of contact will be based on the needs of the individual child and what is in the child's best interests. Decisions will remain flexible to the changing needs of a child.

Where a child is of an age to understand, the child's views and wishes in relation to adoption will be considered when making plans for the child.

The Adoption Service aims to provide anyone enquiring about adoption with full information on the adoption process so that they can make an informed judgement about whether or not to proceed with their application. This will include those wishing to adopt from within the United Kingdom and from overseas, foster carers wishing to adopt a child already in their care and stepparents and relatives wishing to adopt a child from within their family. Prospective adopters will be welcomed without prejudice and will be provided with clear eligibility criteria. They will also be given information on children waiting and what is required to meet the children's needs.

The adoption provision aims to provide a service to birth parents and birth families that takes into account the lifelong implications of adoption and treats each individual fairly and with respect. Birth parent(s) and birth families will be given information on local, regional and national support groups, and where an adult adoptee requires information from their birth records, the adoption service aims to provide a supportive and informative service at all times.

The Adoption Service aims to provide information, help and support for all those who have been affected by adoption whether prior to, or after, the making of an Adoption Order.

The Adoption Service also aims to protect all the information held and will provide security and confidentiality for all records, including those to be held for 100 years from the making of the Adoption Order.

The Adoption Service will maintain management information systems in order to monitor and evaluate the service provided and ensure all work is undertaken with the requirements of the National Minimum Standards, current legislation and Regulations, current policy statements and with accepted good practice in mind.

Where can I see this guide

Written copies are available at the Adoption Team. If you would like a written copy please contact the Adoption Service Manager at the address above or by contacting johines@southend.gov.uk The guide is available on the Southend Borough Council website The statement will be translated into other languages or made available in a format that is right for someone with physical, sensory and learning impairments and communication difficulties, upon request.

The service values

A Southend where all Children achieve success is the shared vision across Children's Services 'We aim to make sure that all children and young people who live in Southend are able to take advantage of the opportunities which are here now and to enhance these opportunities for the future. It is to

- Help them raise their aspiration and achievement, achieving a sense of pride and joy
- Ensure they have the opportunities they need for inclusion and prosperity
- Facilitate their participation to be active and involved in decisions that affects their lives
- Strive for excellence in the services we provide to ensure all young people are safe and well The Adoption Service's values include:
 - Being child centred; their best interests being paramount
 - Focusing on outcomes for children
 - Being outward looking, flexible, adapting to new ideas and ways of working and being responsive to individual need
 - A commitment to learning
 - Listening to children and their families
 - Ensure that the services promotes equal opportunities and does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of their age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnic origin, religion or culture
 - Contributing to the RAA Adopt East and other, regional and national agencies to improve standards and offer a complete service, taking every opportunity to share best practice as openly as possible
 - Improving standards of practice and service continuously to respond to changes in law and challenge poor practice
 - A commitment to Children Services Practice Priorities and 2050 vision for Southend

How will this happen?

These Aims and Objectives will be achieved by:

- Demonstrating and supporting all using Restorative Principles
- Providing placement choices that reflect: Equality Diversity Individual and personal needs Social and cultural background preferences

- Delivering Regional placements wherever possible and appropriate to facilitate ongoing appropriate levels of post-adoption support
- Active leadership that delivers clarity of purpose to the adoption service
- Clarity about the purpose of individual placements
- Matching placement availability to requirements
- 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 Responding positively to complaints and feedback Learning from any placement disruptions
- Involving children in policy and decision making
- Ensuring that children's wishes and feelings will be actively sought and fully taken into account at all stages
- Taking corporate responsibility within Children's Services for the effective management, quality and support of placements
- Being vigorous in challenging poor practice and addressing problems effectively
- Providing appropriate and pro-active guidance and support to birth parents
- Undertaking ongoing quality assurance and consultation to ensure that the service focuses on outcomes for children

The Policies

There are detailed adoption policies and procedures to guide the way in which the principles are practiced. These cover children, adopters, birth families, adoption support, and non-agency adoption and inter country adoption. New staff and panel members are given a copy of the adoption policies and informed of any changes. A written copy can be obtained as above in 'Where can I see this guide?' There is also a complete range of more general Southend Borough Council's policies which all staff first access as part of their induction.

The Structure of the Service

The Adoption Team is part of the Department Children and Public Health. The Executive Director and DCS is Michael Marks. The Interim Director of Children's Social Work, Early Help and Youth Support is Alexander Kubeyinje, who is also the Agency Decision Maker and

The Adoption Service is part of children's services and is led by the Head of Corporate Parenting, placements and resources.

- Alexander Kubeyinje is the Interim Director Children's Social Work, Early Help and Youth Support. He is a qualified social worker with over 20 years experience.
- Sara Scholey is interim Head of Service for Corporate Parenting, Placements and Resources. Sara is a qualified social worker with over 20 years of experience across a variety of service areas including residential care, adoption, fostering children who are looked after and care leavers.
- Jo Hines is the Service Manager. She has worked for Southend Adoption Service since 2007 and brings extensive adoption experience having worked previously in the Adoption Service in Essex since 1997. Jo has BA in social work, Dip SW and a Masters in Professional Practice including management and leadership. Jo has a particular interest in Theraplay in which she holds level 1

& 2 training, which brings an added dimension to the Team. She has level 1 & 2 Dyadic Development Psychotherapy; levels 1&2 Sensory Attachment Intervention, NPP level 1, Foundations in Attachment training, Therapeutic Life story Work, NVR and also has training in facilitating The Just Right State. Her Masters focused on developing policy and practice in the area of sibling assessment.

- Sonia Jenkins part time Team Manager joined the Service in January 2021. Sonia brings management experience in service improvement and design, Fostering, Child Protection, Care Management and adoption. Sonia Leads on Service Improvement, Performance and staff training across the team. She obtained her DipSW in 2007 and BA in Social Work in 2008. In addition, Sonia has MA in Psychotherapeutic Counselling and qualifications in Group Counselling, attachment and loss.

- Aimee Fossett, part time Advanced Practitioner, was a student social worker in the team in 2009 and joined the team on a permanent basis in 2010 having gained her Degree in Social Work at the University of Essex. She has level 1 Dyadic Development psychology; levels 1&2 Sensory Attachment Intervention, level 1 & 2 Theraplay, NPP level 1, Foundations in Attachment training, NVR and also can train in The Just Right State. (Aimee is currently on maternity leave)
- Karina O'Keefe, part time Advanced Practitioner, joined the service in October 2020. She completed her Masters in Social Work from Canterbury University in 1999. She has a Post Graduate Diploma in Systemic Practice with Families and Couples from the Institute of Family therapy. She has worked for various local authorities as Child Protection, Looked After Children and Fostering Social Worker. She has also worked as an Independent Social Worker and more recently for an Independent Fostering Agency as a Supervising Social Worker.
- Faye Khraud, (since July 2012) part time. Faye gained a BA in Social Work at the University of Essex in 2010 and worked in the Care Management Teams in Southend prior to joining the adoption team. She has level 1 Dyadic Development psychology; levels 1&2 Sensory Attachment Intervention and foundation & level 1 Just Right State and level 1 & 2 Theraplay.
- Anne Caine - holds an NNEB Nursery Nurse Examination Board (Distinction) Child Development. Higher National Diploma in Child Care and Education and a Social Work Degree in September 2007 after qualifying as a social worker she worked in First Contact Team as a front line social worker. In August 2013 she moved to the Southend Adoption Team. Anne holds level 1 Sensory Attachment Intervention and foundation & Level 1 Just Right State.
- Anna Harris, Part time - completed her BSc in Applied Psychology and Sociology at Surrey in 2007, and an MSW at Kingston University in 2012. She has undertaken training in Motivational Interviewing, Pervasive Neglect, Using the Assessment Framework, Theraplay level 1, Working with sex offenders in child protection work, and Suicide and Self harm.
- Melanie Griffiths joined the service in September 2019. She has a degree in Social Work which she obtained from the University of Essex and recently completed her AYSE year with Southend.
- Beth Andrews joined the service in March 2020 she gained her degree in social work from the Oxford Brookes University in 2017 and has previously worked in assessment and intervention as a children's social worker and also in a fostering as a supervising social worker.

The Systems in place to Monitor and Evaluate the Provision of Services

Statistical records are kept of the adoption service's activities, these are analysed to evaluate and monitor the service, to ensure children's plans are moving forward within timescales that meet their needs, and that adopters are being assessed and approved within the timescales of the National Adoption Minimum Standards.

Monitoring is undertaken to provide information on the needs of the children requiring adoption, the numbers of adopters required, and to ensure sufficient staff are available to provide an effective and efficient service.

The Government introduced an Adoption Scorecard in 2012 which set priorities for all Adoption Services. Southend uses this as an additional tool to monitor and evaluate the provision of services within the Agency.

Following approval, adopters are reviewed every year and are referred back to the adoption panel if they have not been linked within two years of approval. Statistical records are also kept of all post adoption activity.

The following systems are in place to monitor and evaluate the service given:

- Preparation courses, the value of the training, information and preparation given.
- Case work supervision and performance management of staff.
- Quality assurance of papers going to the Adoption Panel.
- Adoptive applicants attending panel are asked to provide feedback on their experiences.
- Feedback on cases presented by members of the Adoption Panel.
- Review of how members of the Adoption Panel fulfil their functions.
- Following the making of an Adoption Order, adopters are asked to complete an evaluation form so that the service they have received can be monitored, and where necessary, improved.
- Various consultation exercises undertaken into specific areas of the service
- Southend participation survey
- File audits as part of the corporate audit process

Systems for providing feedback and evaluation from the following groups are in place. These include:

- 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 to 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 / BRIC users (birth record counselling and adult adoptees) and the service they received

Services Provided

The Service is part of Adopt East Regional Adoption Alliance which went live in October 2020. The Team 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, post adoption services and inter country adoptions.

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

What services are provided?

The Adoption Service provides adoptive families for Southend as part of Adopt East. The Agency offers placements with adopters who have been approved and who are provided with comprehensive support and training.

The Adoption Service offers a therapeutic service for young people through the local EWMHS, and where needed with adjoining EWMHS services, where adopters live outside the boundaries. The Family Engagement Team also undertakes therapeutic life story work with children.

Specialist education support is available through the Looked after Children's Advisory Teacher and Virtual Head Teacher, until the making of an adoption order and beyond, if the family reside in Southend.

Specialist Health support is available through the agency's Looked after Children Nurse and Consultant Paediatrician service.

Adopters are supported through the process of adoption by the allocation of an adoption Social Worker, where possible the worker who has completed their assessment with them. They visit regularly according to need, pre and post placement and have telephone contact in the intervening periods. They are 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 reports for the Court.

A post approval group meets on a monthly basis for approved adopters awaiting placement to offer ongoing training and to share profiles of children needing adoption. As Adopt East there is also access to Link Maker which supports the Family Finding process.

A Southend post adoption support group meets on a monthly basis, which looks at issues such as managing difficult behaviour, the effects of separation and loss, first aid and life story work as well as offering a Christmas Party and other social events throughout the year.

Family events take place at least twice a year enabling adopters and their children to meet and integrate with other such families within their immediate and wider networks, further seeking to normalise adoption for all and strengthening the links developed between them further.

A Theraplay parent and toddler group for adopters with pre-school placements to support the development of secure attachment. (Sparkles) and thus improve outcomes for children placed for adoption. Non Violent Resistance and Just Right State programmes are run according to demand as is 'super siblings' a group supporting other children in a family approved for adoption.

A Birth Relative support group runs on a monthly basis (although currently impacted by Covid) to support birth parents / relatives with issues regarding adoption and to support the ongoing development of their Information Exchange and challenges arising from contact. This aim is to help support and facilitate contact between adopted children and their birth parents in a meaningful way.

Any family living in the Southend area whose lives are affected by adoption are able to apply to the Southend Adoption Service and request an assessment of need. This will be undertaken by a qualified adoption social worker to identify support required and available to the family or person concerned. A Support Plan will then be drawn up and agreed by the Adoption Support Services Advisor. Southend also has close links with Adoption Plus and Barnardo's as part of Adopt East, to help advise on the most complex cases

Recruitment of adopters

Any person expressing an interest in adoption is invited to one of the local information events, held both virtually and directly on a monthly basis. Adoption information is also available on the Southend Borough Council website. The team also have an active Facebook page which gives information and activity news.

Key Aims of the Recruitment Strategy;

- Recruit a variety of adopters to meet the ever-changing needs of children in Southend and across the region 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
- Make adoptive families available through Link Maker in a timely manner.
-

Prospective applicants are encouraged to attend one of the monthly information sharing events run by Southend. Following this, applicants are encouraged to explore their interest in adoption further and to inform us if they wish to proceed with Southend. A Registration of Interest Form is sent to the applicants to begin their adoption process. Once received, they will be notified within 5 working days as to whether Southend will proceed with their application and statutory checks are then started. The applicants then enter stage 1 of the process which is completed within 2 months. Southend allocate an agency advisor to support the family through stage

At the end of stage 1 there will be a formal interview after which applicants will be invited to formally apply and a written agreement completed. At this point applicants begin stage 2 of the process. A decision re the suitability to adopt must be made by the Agency within 4 months of the acceptance of the formal application – 6 months in exceptional circumstances. If the preceding processes follow each other without a gap, it will be the aim to complete the whole process within eight months from start to finish. This process is adopter led and applicants can go on hold for up to a 6 month period.

Prior to the “preferred option decision”, a worker is allocated from the Adoption Team to link up with the social worker and begin family finding and hopefully direct work with the birth family. This support they can continue for as long as it is required and certainly until the making of the adoption order.

Once a child has been referred for adoption, a child’s permanence report and adoption placement report are prepared. During this work it is ensured that:

- Children are carefully listened to where they are old enough.
- Children’s views about their situation 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. (For more information see Adoption Agency Policy Statement)

Birth families views about placements are sought and taken into account. Every effort is made to find a placement, which meets the child’s emotional and developmental needs. This considers their trauma history, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender and disability. However, no child should be unduly delayed identifying an ideal match. Placements that cannot match all identified needs, but are sympathetic and committed to them, should be explored. 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 birth and early life, and provides up to-date information about themselves and their situation. The child’s social worker writes this letter to be read by young adopted people when they reach their teenage years. 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. 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 films, prepared by the prospective adopters

Prospective Adopters

Adoptive applicants 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, are sought in order to meet the diverse needs of children in this area. People who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and given clear information about recruitment, assessment and approval. They will be treated fairly throughout the adoption process. (For procedures, criteria and more detailed information see; Adoption Agency Policy and Information for Adopters leaflet)

Adopters will need to show that they can:

- Learn from their experiences
- Cope with stress
- Meet the ethnic, cultural, health and educational needs of the child needing adoption
- Offer consistency of care
- Work with children's social workers and other agencies to secure necessary services for the child
- Build and sustain close, intimate and reciprocal relationships
- Understand other people's points of view and their feelings
- Be in touch with sad and angry feelings
- Resolve past wrongs or losses
- Build secure attachments and share difficulties

At all stages of referral people are informed about a wide range of people who can adopt. These include:

- Families from all types of backgrounds
- Couples with or without children
- Couples who are married or not;
- from the LGBTQ community
- Single people
- People from all ethnicities
- People with disabilities
- People who are not 'perfect'
- People who have had problems in the past
- People who rent their houses
- Some overweight and older people and smokers (subject to medical advice)
- People whose infertility treatment has ended.

Further explanation is available for each bullet points. For instance, when discussing weight, smoking and age this is qualified by explaining that adopters need to have the likelihood of maintaining the health and vigour needed to meet the many and varied demands of children throughout their childhood and into adulthood. Adopters are clearly told that if they smoke they are unable to adopt a child under the age of 5 years. They are also told that they are not deemed to be a non-smoker until they have given up for a period of twelve months.

Further information is given about the qualities needed to adopt, which are:

- The ability to see and accept the child as he or she is, not how you would like them to be
- Acceptance, commitment, flexibility, stickability, sensitivity and openness.
- The ability to cope with a bit of a mess and disruption
- Ability to ask for and accept help
- A sense of humour.

The information for the assessment is brought together in a format known as the PAR (Prospective Adopters Report). An adoption social worker visits applicants in their own home. They are seen together and separately if there is more than one applicant. Applicants are invited to make their own written as well as verbal contributions to their assessment. Work with the adopters own children is also undertaken if appropriate. Other members of the household are also interviewed. Significant relatives and referees are seen at this stage, also ex-partners. The assessing social worker will analyse the information and make a recommendation about the suitability of the applicants to be adopters. Applicants see the

completed Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) and are asked to sign to say that they agree its contents. Prospective adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel where their application is considered.

Post approval

The Agency will review approved adopters every twelve months whilst on the register and continue to provide advice, support and counselling. After two years the assessment will be updated and represented to panel. Every effort will be made to match the applicants with a suitable child or children. Applicants should be clear however that our priority is to find appropriate families for children.

Approved adopters will be added to Adoption Link to support the family finding process.

Prospective adopters receive preparation for a child being placed when they attend the preparation course, during their assessment and in the transition planning. 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 too. If the prospective adopters wish to proceed, they will receive further detailed information including the child's permanence report. The family finding social worker and child's social worker will visit them and they will have the opportunity to meet the child's foster carer.

All prospective adoptive parents have the opportunity to have a consultation with the medical advisor prior to the matching adoption panel. Where the child's case has been considered by court, leave of the court will be sought to disclose specialist written reports about the child that may help adopters to make informed decisions.

The agency 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 the full 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; information exchange and ongoing support and training.

Following approval of the match at the full adoption panel, an adoption placement planning meeting will be called. The Adoption Service / Team Manager or Advanced 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 adoption support plan. A transition plan is devised in consultation with the adopters.

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 services both in house and by other agencies as part of the adoption support plan. 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

Financial and other support arrangements

For placements arranged through Southend Adoption Agency, the Agency is able to pay introductory expenses and will meet costs of legal expenses where the adoption is contested or particularly complex.

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, the Agency assesses

whether it should assist. The adoption support plan must be agreed by the Adoption Services Support Adviser (the Service Manager or Head of Service) and with the adoptive family before being presented to the Adoption Panel.

Subsequently, the child and 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). Southend will consider assisting adopters before and after the child is adopted. This support is available to any adopter living in the Southend area, whether the child has been placed by Southend or not.

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 Southend Borough Council may agree to regular payments for a period of up to two years.

Where a need for therapeutic support is identified an Application to the Adoption Support Fund may be completed.

Making, reviewing and amendment contact and family time arrangements

Southend Adoption Agency recognises the importance of children and young people having suitable family time 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. The Agency Decision Maker will review contact plans at the Preferred Option Stage and later as part of the matching process.

The agency operates an Information Exchange scheme for the exchange of information between adoptive families and birth families. Birth families are also supported in arrangements for the Information Exchange and direct face-to-face contact with the child by adoption support social workers. 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, although where appropriate these can take place at a later time. Other significant birth relatives may also be involved.

After placement, contact arrangements continue to be revisited at each review, but not after an adoption order is made. If there are any issues that arise later, these are addressed through the adoption support social workers.

A birth parent drop-in is run on a monthly basis to offer birth parents support and advice in all matters relating to adoption, but in particular to support with contact arrangements. The Adoption Agency recognises that the contact requirements in each individual case, vary and need to remain flexible in order to meet a child's ever changing needs, therefore when approached Southend Adoption Service seek to review any request, ultimately the child's new parents will make decisions according to what they feel is in their child's best interests. When adoptees approach adulthood they are written too to advise them of the support available to manage their own contact plans

What happens if placements break down

Very few placements for children do disrupt. However, where there is a disruption the Agency convenes 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, and with the Adoption Panel to inform future practice.

Birth Families

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. 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 provided by another local authority or purchased independently.

The Agency will provide a service for birth parents that 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. 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. 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. (For more information see Adoption Agency Policy Statement) A Birth Parent drop-in runs on a monthly basis to support Birth Parents with any issue relating to adoption and especially to support in the provision of letterbox contact.

Step-parent adoption

The 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.

Enquirers are sent written information about non-agency adoption within 2 working days. If having read the information provided, families wish to proceed, they are asked to apply in writing. Applicants are asked to complete the forms for statutory checks in line with agency adopters.

The adoption team will provide a detailed report for the court having considered all alternatives to adoption with the applicants.

The Agency has a duty to only recommend adoption where it is in the best interests of the child for an order to be made. 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. (For more information see Adoption Agency policy Statement)

Services for adopted adults

The Service offers counselling and acts 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. This service is available to adopted adults living in this area even when the adoptions were arranged through other Adoption agencies. (For more information see Adoption Agency policy Statement)

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. Support is offered to all young adult adoptees as they reach 18 regarding on-going information exchange and where appropriate the tracing of birth records and/or their birth parents.

Birth family initiated contact

Requests from adult birth family members for help seeking information or making contact with adult adoptees, placed by the Agency, will be facilitated by the team, who will act as an intermediary, approaching the adult adoptee, where their whereabouts can be found. Recognising the potential impact that this work may have upon the adopted person, their separated sibling 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 Service will be to assist the individual to understand and accept the situation they are in and the choices open to them, not to advocate on their behalf. (For more information see Adoption Agency Policy Statement)

Applications for approval as an Inter-country Adopter

The Service believes that with inter-country adoptions, as with all other adoptions, the child's needs are paramount. The service 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. The team will apply the same standards as for domestic adoptions. (For further information see Adoption Agency Policy Statement)

Equal Opportunities

The Adoption Team is committed to working in an anti-discriminatory way, incorporating the Authorities Equal Opportunities 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.

Child Protection

The Service complies with the SET procedures and Southend Safeguarding Children Partnership policy in all areas of child protection and provides adequate training to its staff and adopters to ensure that children are safeguarded and protected at all times.

Adoption Panel

Southend Adoption Panel is compliant with The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amend 2011 & 2013) and relevant guidance.

Terms of reference for this panel and panel membership are available within the Southend Adoption Agency Policies.

The panel consists of people with a wide range of experience and diverse backgrounds and operates at sufficient frequency to avoid delay in considering children for adoption, approval of adopters and matching. The Adoption panel is set up in accordance with government regulations.

The panel is there to make recommendations to the agency on three main issues

- Whether to approve people as suitable adopters
- Whether to dual approve for Early Permanence

- Whether a match for a child with a particular adopter is right for them

They also comment on –

- Adoption Support Plans
- Contact arrangements
- Issues of concern, which they feel the Agency needs to put right
- Quality assurance matters

The Agency Decision Maker will then consider the panel's recommendations before making a decision. Whether a child should be placed for adoption is now the decision of the Decision Maker and is no longer presented to the full adoption panel apart from where a child is relinquished.

Panel Arrangements

Southend has one Adoption Panel which usually meets monthly.

The panel has been reconstituted under the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 – amended 2011 & 2013. There is a central list of panel members who perform the functions of the adoption panel.

The panel ensures an independent chairperson. Southend appointed Panel Chair (Neil Woodbridge) in April 2020, and we have an independent Vice-Chair who will stand in as required.

The main decision maker is Alex Kubeyinje, Interim Director of Children's Social work, Early Help and Youth Support. He has overall responsibility for services for looked after children and is Decision Maker in cases presented for Preferred Option. There is a deputy Agency Decision Maker, Ruth Baker, Head of Quality, Practice & Principal Social Worker.

Involving people in Agency Decisions

Applicants to be approved as adopters are always invited to attend the panel where their approval is being considered and subsequently when they are matched with a child. The panel always gives reasons for their recommendations. These reasons are recorded in the panel minutes.

When applicants attend panel they are informed of the recommendation immediately in most cases, otherwise within 24 hours. Decisions are made within 7 days of the Decision Maker receiving the relevant minutes.

Individual decisions are made about when and how to tell children about agency decisions that adoption is right for them. The child's age, maturity and understanding and what they are likely to understand is taken into account.

If the decision maker is minded not to approve an adoptive applicant or not to continue with their assessment, he will write to them setting out the reasons and giving them the chance within 40 days to ask for the decision to be reviewed by the Independent Review Mechanism.

Placements with other Adoption Agencies

As a Regional Adoption Alliance Adopt East approve adopters as a resource to the region. When children's needs cannot be met within Adopt East, they will be placed with adopters approved by other

adoption agencies. Similarly, adopters approved within Adopt East who do not match the needs of the local children are assisted to have a child placed with them from elsewhere.

A Summary of the Complaints Procedure

Established in Accordance with Section 26(3) of the Children Act 1989(A) and the Complaints Procedure Directions 1990 (B) Complaints about adoption fall into two categories as follows:

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 Southend Borough Council's Department for Public Health and Children. A service user or somebody acting on their behalf can make a complaint by contacting:

Customer Services Manager
Department for Public Health and Children
PO Box 6,
Civic Centre
Victoria Avenue Southend – on – Sea
Essex SS2 6ER

Where the complaint relates to the fact that the Agency Decision Maker decides not to approve the applicant, then the applicant will have the opportunity to have their case reviewed by the adoption service or be referred to the Independent Review Mechanism. The Independent Reviewing Mechanism is organised by the British Association of Adoption and Fostering.

The Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) is a review process, conducted by a panel, which prospective adopters can use when they have been informed that the Adoption Agency does not consider them suitable and does not propose to approve them as adoptive parents (or has withdrawn the approval). More information on the IRM can be obtained from: Contract Manager, Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) Unit 4, Pavilion Business Park, Royds Hall Road, Wortley, LEEDS LS12 6AJ
Telephone: 0845 450 3956 Fax: 0845 450 3957 Email: irm@baaf.org.uk

Contact Addresses and Telephone Numbers

The Southend – on – Sea Borough Council Adoption Agency is registered with:

OFSTED
Piccadilly
Gate Store Street
Manchester M1 2WD
08456 404045
Enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

Southend Adoption and Fostering,
Floor 7,
Civic Centre,
Victoria Avenue,
Southend on Sea,
Essex
01702 212004

[Facebook.com/SouthendAdoptionAgency](https://www.facebook.com/SouthendAdoptionAgency)
[Twitter@southendbc](https://twitter.com/southendbc)
[Flickr.com/southendbc](https://www.flickr.com/photos/southendbc/)
[Instagram.com/southendbc](https://www.instagram.com/southendbc)

The System for Reviewing the Statement of Purpose

The Statement of Purpose will be reviewed annually and presented to Southend Borough Council's Cabinet for approval. For a copy of this document in any other format / language, or to order more copies, please call 01702 212004