



Information for Prospective Adopters

London Borough of Hackney

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Introduction

This leaflet is about the adoption process and is a guideline for families interested in adopting a child. It outlines what families can expect from Hackney.

All adoption agencies work within statutory guidelines that set out what applicants can expect from an adoption service. The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Adoption Minimum Standards govern the way in which adoption services are run but there are some variations in procedure and practice between agencies.

First Contact

If you are interested in adoption you can telephone the Hackney Adoption Unit and a social worker will talk to you about your personal circumstances, take down some basic details and answer any questions that you may have.

Alternatively, you can visit our website, www.hackney.gov.org.uk/adoption to register your details there. We will contact you to talk to you about how to take things further.

In our experience families come in various forms and from all types of backgrounds. We accept applications from applicants who we think can meet the needs of children who are looked after. This includes single people, co-habiting couples and same sex couples.

We run a number of adoption information events throughout the year to which you are welcome to attend. Please contact the duty social worker in the adoption team who will provide you with the details of the next session.

Once we receive your details your case will be discussed within the unit and our consultant social worker will make a decision about whether we can take your enquiry forward. If we are not able to process your enquiry we will let you know and discuss the reasons for our decision with you.

If you are moving to the next stage a social worker will contact you to arrange to visit you in your home.

This gives us an opportunity to learn more about you and your family and to explain the process of adoption in greater depth. You will also have the chance to find out more about adoption and how it will affect your life.

After our visit, we ask you to take some time to decide if you want to take your enquiry further and to let us know. We will share the new information we have about you with the unit and if we decide to proceed we will invite you to complete an application form which must be returned to us before you can attend a preparation group.

If we decide not to take up your application, we will talk to you about the reasons for this decision and follow this up in writing. If you are not satisfied with our explanation or the service you have received you can request a meeting with a social worker or manager. If you are not satisfied with the outcome of this meeting you can contact our complaints unit who will give you some advice about what to do next.

Preparation Group

We usually run about three preparation groups per year and families are expected to attend all the sessions.

Once we begin the assessment, you will be invited to a preparation group. This will happen either before you meet with your assessing social worker for the first time or during the assessment. It depends on the circumstances. Attendance at the preparation group is compulsory and forms a part of the assessment. If you have difficulty in attending all or part of the group sessions please let your social worker know as soon as possible.

The form and content of the group varies from time to time, but it usually takes place over three or four consecutive days. The programme is run by adoption social workers with some input from our clinician. No more than 10 applicants are invited to attend at any one time.

The meetings cover a number of topics relating to adoption including talking about adoption with a child, separation and loss, dealing with the child's past, managing difficult behaviour, the role of the social worker, adjusting to life as an adoptive family and managing contact with the birth family. We usually invite a number of guest speakers with personal experience of adoption such as: adoptive parents, foster parents and adults who have been adopted.

Assessment

Once we accept an adoption application from you; you cannot be assessed by another agency. It is not possible to be assessed or approved as an adopter by more than one agency at a time.

The allocated social worker from the adoption unit will visit you at home usually between 6-12 times to get to know you and your family better. This social worker is responsible for compiling a report about you and your family circumstances known as a Prospective Adopters Report (PAR). They will want to see each family member individually, as well as meet you as a family group.

The prospect of an 'assessment' may seem daunting at first but our aim is to ensure that all our adopters understand the effect early experiences may have on children and are suitable to care for children who have been looked after. The assessment helps you and the social worker work in partnership and is a chance for you to think about and prepare yourself for adopting a child. It is important for us to get to know you, so that we can match you appropriately with a child at a later stage.

As part of your application to adopt the agency is required to undertake checks and references from a number of sources. You will be asked to undertake a full health check and your GP will be approached for a medical report. Checks will be taken up with the Local Authorities you have lived in for the past ten years and the NSPCC to find out if you are known to them and if so; in what capacity. We will take up a police check on you and any adults in your network who are likely to have frequent contact or care of the child through the Criminal Records Bureau.

We will ask you to nominate three personal referees who can comment on your experience of children and your suitability to adopt. We will visit them to talk about their comments. We will also meet any person who will be closely involved with a child's care, such as a grandparent.



If you were previously married, in a civil partnership or long term relationship and you have co parented children, we will need to contact your ex partners. We appreciate that this may be a sensitive situation and any difficulties or anxieties that you may have will be considered carefully.

It is important that you let us know as soon as possible beforehand of any issues (such as police convictions) that may arise as a result of these checks.

We will always try to process your assessment in a timely way without undue delay, in line with the National Adoption Minimum Standards. In Hackney, we aim to complete all assessments within 4 - 8 months.

Once the assessment is complete, you will be given a copy of the report and will have up to 10 days to let us know if you have any comments that you would like included in the report. Usually, this involves factual inaccuracies and minor alterations to the way in which events or attitudes are described. Occasionally you and the social worker may not agree on some elements of the content of the report. In this case you can submit your own written comments, which will be attached to the report.

The Adoption Social Worker will present the report along with your comments to the next meeting of the Adoption and Permanency Panel.

The Adoption and Permanency Panel

Before the agency approves a family for adoption, places a child for adoption or agrees adoption as the plan for the child, they must refer the case to the Adoption and Permanency Panel. The Panel meeting must have a minimum of five members to make a recommendation about your case but the final decision rests with the Agency Decision Maker. In practice, it is unusual for the Agency Decision Maker not to follow the Panel's recommendation.

Towards the end of your assessment, your social worker will talk to you about attending panel. Usually, families attend the panel with their social worker. This gives them a chance to meet panel members who are making the recommendations. They will have read the report about you and may have questions for you and the social worker before they deliberate and make their recommendation. It is not compulsory and if you decide against coming to Panel, this will not affect the panel's recommendation.

Hackney is part of a joint panel with the City of London Corporation and the panel membership reflects this arrangement.

The membership of the Adoption Panel consists of an independent Panel Chair, Panel Advisor, a number of agency professionals from Hackney and the City of London Corporation working within a childcare setting, a legal and medical advisor and a number of independent members with personal and /or professional experience of adoption.

When the Panel recommends a family's approval, they will give some advice about the specific number and gender of children within a particular age range that you may be considered for. You will already have had a discussion with your social worker and a recommendation will be included in the report. Often panel's advice will be based on this recommendation.

It is possible, but unusual, for the Panel to be asked to recommend a match between you and a particular child at the same panel meeting. Normally this happens some time after your approval. The Panel's recommendation is passed to the Assistant Director for Children and Young People's Services who will make a decision.

You will be told the outcome of the panel's recommendation on the day and receive written notification within seven working days. If the decision is taken not to approve you as prospective adopters you will be advised of the reasons verbally and in writing. You then have a period of 40 days in which you can make a representation to the Agency Decision Maker about the decision.

If you make a representation to the ADM they may refer the matter back to the Panel for reconsideration. If you are not satisfied with the outcome you can apply to the Independent Review Mechanism. The Independent Review Mechanism is an independent panel who will examine your application and make a recommendation to the local authority.

The Assistant Director will take into account the IRM's view when considering your case again and will advise you of the full and final decision in writing.

One final word about Adoption panels – sometimes the panel may postpone a decision about an adopter's approval or a proposed placement, pending further information or clarification about a particular issue. This is uncommon and is often a reflection of the panel exercising due caution rather than harbouring serious doubts.

We understand the obvious disappointment and anxiety that this causes, but be reassured that interests of the child and you and your family are at the forefront of these decisions.

Matching a Child

Once you are approved, you become part of our pool of prospective adopters who are waiting for placements. Approved adopters who wait for a match are reviewed on an annual basis. This is to update your circumstances and check that you are still in a position to adopt. If there are significant changes to your circumstances that prevent you from adopting we will reassess your situation and prepare a report for panel who will re consider your application. You will have the opportunity to have your views represented and you can attend panel if you wish. The panel process and rights of appeal remain the same and you will be advised both verbally and in writing of the panel recommendation and the ADM's decision.

If you are identified as a possible match for a child, your family finding social worker and the child's social worker will exchange information. You will be given full details about the child from the Child Permanence Report and the child's social worker will use your PAR to learn more about you and what you have to offer. If they both believe that you can match the child's needs, you will be invited to meet with the child's social worker where you will have the chance to ask questions – we will always share all the information we have about a child with you.

It is important to share your thoughts and feelings with us if you have significant doubts about a potential placement. We will take the time to talk with you about your concerns but if your doubts cannot be resolved we will understand if you feel unable to proceed further. We know from experience that adopters might sometimes feel under pressure to agree to a placement, out of the misguided fear that turning down a proposal may mean that they will not be considered for another child.



This is not the case. Whilst we would not approach you with a placement unless we sincerely believed that you could meet the needs of the child, we still accept that adopters will have their own perspective and that it is vital for the success of the placement that you feel genuinely positive about the child.

If all parties are happy to proceed to the next stage, an Adoption Placement Report will be prepared jointly by the child's social worker and the family finding social worker with some input from you about how you see yourselves meeting the needs of the child. The report will detail the proposed arrangements for supporting the placement, the reasons for choosing you for this particular child, as well as any proposals for contact with birth family and/or significant people from the child's past.

You have 10 working days to make your written comments on the Adoption Placement Report. The entire report is submitted to the Panel with your PAR and the Child's Permanence Report. The Adoption Panel will make a recommendation on the suitability of the match to the ADM and you will be notified of the decision verbally and in writing.

Being approved by Hackney does not mean that only children in care to the London Borough of Hackney can be placed with you. Once you have been approved you can be considered for potential placements through the National Adoption Register. This means that you can be considered for children from any part of the country. However, we have many children in Hackney who need placements and we ask you to wait at least three months before we refer you to the register.

We are part of a local consortium that manages a Joint Adoption Register with the other agencies in the North East of London region for adopters and children who are waiting. We review the children and families waiting regularly and can often identify potential matches through this pool. Many families and agencies subscribe to adoption

periodicals – Be My Parent (published by BAAF) and Children Who Wait (published by Adoption UK) and matches are sometimes made through these links. Most of the children who are placed through this route are of school-age or from minority ethnic groups. Agencies frequently look for families who can take on large sibling groups, or children with disabilities. Before approaching an agency about a child, you should speak to your social worker who can contact the child’s agency on your behalf for more information.

It sometimes occurs that prospective adopters are approached about a particular child or children before they are finally approved as adopters. This usually happens when the child is in the final stages of Care Proceedings and the Court have asked the local authority to confirm whether they have adopters available who could consider this child. Sometimes adopters will be assessed with a specific child or children in mind. Usually this occurs when the family have responded to a feature about a specific child. Where the motivation to adopt comes from an interest in a particular child, this will often be the most appropriate route.

In either of these cases, the Adoption and Permanence Panel and the ADM will still need to make a recommendation and a decision before a placement can be made.

Planning a Placement

Following the Local Authority’s decision to ‘match’ a child with your family, you will be given an Adoption Placement Plan, similar to the Adoption Placement Report. This outlines the agreed support package you and your family can expect from Hackney after the child is placed.

Before meeting a child, you will be asked to attend a meeting with the child’s foster carers, the child’s social worker, your social worker

and a clinician or family therapist. The meeting will set out a detailed plan of how the child is to be introduced to you. It is important that arrangements are clear and agreed beforehand to avoid any confusion that might upset the child’s confidence.

The length of introductions is usually dependent on the age of the child, about a week for a baby, and 2-4 weeks for older children. Within the limits of practicality, the contact between the adopters and the child will be quite intensive.

The introductions will allow you and the child to begin to get to know one another, before you live together full time. Introductions usually go well, but sometimes adopters may have doubts about whether the placement would be right for them or the child. Withdrawing from the introductions is a serious step and will be upsetting for both you and the child. If you are experiencing such doubts speak to your social worker who can support you. We believe that it is important for you to be honest with yourselves about what is right for you and the child.

At the point that the child moves into your home, you will be asked to sign an agreement relating to the adoptive placement. This is a legal undertaking confirming your agreement to care for the child under adoption regulations. Until an Adoption Order is made by a Court, the local authority is still legally responsible for the child’s welfare, and the same pattern of visits, reviews and supervision apply to adoptive placements as with other placements. Adopters sometimes feel uncomfortable and ‘under scrutiny’ during this period. It confirms for them that the child is still not ‘theirs’. However, you must bear in mind that your social worker and the child’s social worker will be committed to the success of the placement in the same way that you are. Their priority will be to help you make the transition to an adoptive family by talking through any problems or anxieties that you may have. We are all on the same side!

Confusion sometimes arises about the roles of the child's social worker and your own social worker. Both will visit you during the placement with their visits co-ordinated so that they are neither not too spaced out or close together. The child's social worker is the officer in the local authority who exercises our legal responsibilities toward the child and deals with all matters relating to their welfare. Naturally, the social worker works within a system of supervision, management and procedure. The child's social worker will meet the child on their own on each visit but will also want to talk to you about how you feel the placement is going.

Your social worker is responsible for your preparation, assessment and support. The focus of the social worker's visits will be your views and feelings about how you and the child are integrating with one another as a family. The social worker may well meet the child in the course of their visit, but this is not the main focus of their role.

Important discussions affecting the child such as consent for medical operations and holidays abroad will need to be referred to the child's social worker. If you have any doubts about who to approach, discuss this with your social worker.

Naturally, the pattern and nature of our involvement will vary depending on whether the child is a baby, toddler or of school-age.

In addition to the social worker's visits, case reviews are held to monitor the progress of the placement at intervals of 4 weeks, 3 months and thereafter every 6 months until the adoption order is granted. These reviews are a statutory part of the local authority's responsibility for every child looked after by them.

The meeting will be chaired by a member of the Council's Independent Reviewing unit, and attended by you, the child (when appropriate), your social worker, the child's social worker and, at times, other professionals who may be actively involved with the child, such as a teacher.

Children in pre-adoptive placements will need to attend Statutory Health Assessments every 6 months for children under 2, and yearly for older children.



Parental Responsibility

The majority of children who are placed for adoption will have been the subject of Care Proceedings at a Family Court, during which the care that they have received in the past will come under scrutiny, and the capacity of the birth parents or other relatives to provide care to the child will already have been assessed. If the child cannot return to their birth family, then a Care Order will usually be granted, and the Local Authority (in the case of young children) may submit an Adoption plan for the child.

It should be noted that Care Proceedings can take a considerable length of time, with the result that few children under the age of one will be available for adoption.

The local authority will apply for a Placement Order which authorises them to place the child with prospective adopters. They do not need to identify any particular adopters in order to obtain a Placement Order but may be asked to do so by the court.

If a parent wishes to consent in advance to the adoption of their child, a Placement Order is not necessary. However, this is not common and usually happens when a mother relinquishes the care of her baby shortly after birth.

When a child is placed for adoption, the adopters will gain a share of 'Parental Responsibility', together with the local authority. The local authority holds overall responsibility and will determine the extent to which responsibility is delegated to the adopters. Adopters will be making the vast majority of the day-to-day decisions about the child themselves, in the same way as other parents.

It is not practical or desirable for adopters to be too dependent on the local authority for minor decisions, or for adopters to feel that

the involvement of the local authority is disruptive to a normal family routine. However, the local authority will need to be kept informed of a child's progress and general welfare, and to be able to exercise a general supervisory role. Although the local authority is legally empowered to intervene on any decision relating to a child, common sense and mutual goodwill means that in the vast majority of cases, social workers and adopters are able to work together in partnership. Once an Adoption Order is granted Parental Responsibility is transferred completely from the local authority to the adopters.

The Legal Process of Adoption

When everyone is in agreement, the adopters will apply to the Court for an Adoption Order. The minimum legal length of time before an adoption application can be lodged with the court is 10 weeks, but sometimes it can take a little longer. It is important that the child has the chance to settle with you and that you are happy with how things are progressing before the adoption is finalised. Once you have completed your adoption application, you can apply to the Family Proceedings Court for an adoption hearing. The local authority will be asked to prepare a report for the Court, detailing the background circumstances of the child, the birth parents and the prospective adopters, as well as any plans for contact.

If the local authority has a Placement Order, or if the birth parents consented to the adoption in advance, the birth parents of a child cannot formally oppose the making of an Adoption Order without the permission of the Court.

An Adoption Order transfers all parental rights and responsibilities to the adoptive parents and so you become the child's legal parents. The legal status of a child within an adoptive family is the same as for a child with their birth parents.

Sometimes this is a time of anxiety for adopters and children, but the adoption plan has already been tested out through the courts who have agreed with the local authority's adoption plan for the child through the granting of a Placement Order. Even when there is no Placement Order, the Court will be very reluctant to disrupt a child from a settled placement.

Contact with Birth Relatives

The older the child, the more likely it is that they will have established relationships with people from their past who are important to them. Often they will already have indicated who they want to remain in touch when they are adopted.

The child's social worker will discuss proposed contact arrangements when a placement with you is being considered.

Contact arrangements vary considerably from child to child and it is quite common for adopters to be asked to keep in touch with birth parents through an annual letter and/or photograph via the post permanency unit. Brothers and sisters in separate adoptive or foster homes are encouraged to stay in touch and it is usually important for them to have some face-to-face contact. Direct contact with birth parents is more unusual, but there are circumstances where this may be appropriate. Sometimes, adopters may be asked if they will remain in contact with other relatives, such as grandparents but this will always be based on the needs of the child and will be reviewed annually.

The court will take an interest in the adoption support plans and can make a Contact Order, although it is more usual for the arrangements to be left to a voluntary arrangement between the various parties involved. In order to clarify expectations, you will usually be asked to sign a contact agreement with the local authority.

It is very unlikely that there would be any future involvement with the court after adoption about contact.

In all cases, the details of the adoptive placement will be protected, unless there are exceptional circumstances and the adopters are in full agreement with their information being shared.

Adoption Support

An Adoption Order ends the local authority's legal relationship with a child, but does not end your family's entitlement to advice and support through our adoption support service. These responsibilities are detailed in the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005.

You can contact us at any stage in the future if you need support. If you live in Hackney and your adoption is less than three years old you can request an assessment of your needs from our Adoption Support Service. This includes financial support if this was agreed before the adoption order was made.

If you adopted many years ago you can approach the local authority you live in who may be able to offer you a service. As part of the service we provide a number of support groups, training and other social events throughout the year. We have a resident clinician who offers therapeutic support to our families.



Adoption Allowances

If adopters are unable to accept a particular placement due to financial considerations, it is possible for the local authority to pay a regular allowance to support the family. These allowances are reviewed every year and are means tested and usually time-limited. For example, until a child reaches school age and both parents are able to return to paid employment. Adopters will be asked to complete a statement of means, and an assessment of the family's needs will be taken into account before a decision about an adoption allowance is made.

Allowances are agreed for a particular placement and are based on the needs of the child. If adopting the child in your care is likely to cause you significant hardship you should discuss your personal circumstances with your social worker as soon as possible. Your social worker will talk to you about where you can get information about your entitlement to state benefits once a child is placed with you and we expect you have made a claim for these benefits before we can consider additional financial support. You can also look at the government website – [Directgov](https://www.direct.gov.uk) for detailed information about the financial support available to adoptive families.

Following a financial assessment we will advise you with some certainty about whether an allowance can be paid.

Adoptive parents are entitled to Adoption Leave from their employer at the time that a child is placed. The terms for this leave are similar to the provisions for Statutory Maternity and Paternity Leave.

Adopted Adults

You will be given full information about the child's background when the placement is agreed. You are encouraged to talk to your child about being adopted and to share information about their background in an age appropriate way. We offer support and training for families who feel they would benefit from additional support.

At 18, the young person can approach the Post Permanency Unit for support in their own right. Hackney will support them in gaining information about their background from the files we hold about their adoption and making contact with birth relatives if this is what they want. Many adopted people are curious about their origins and keen to learn more about their identity. We understand that some adopters may feel vulnerable but it is often not a reflection of the relationship that they have with their child. Adopted adults vary enormously in their attitudes towards accessing records and tracing birth relatives. Some are keen to learn more whilst others show no interest at all. The post permanency unit offers support to adopters whose children are thinking about origins and identity. Please contact us if you would like to make use of this service.

Intermediary services are available to birth relatives, the adopted adult and adoptive parents. Birth relatives can approach the local authority to ask for contact with the adopted person once they reach 18. We will not share any information from the file that identifies you or the adopted person without your permission. If we receive an enquiry from a birth relative we will contact you and the adopted person to let you know and support you as much as we can whilst a decision is made about whether to have contact or not.

Further Information



More information about adoption regulation and practice can be found at the following websites:

www.baaf.org.uk

The British Agencies of Adoption and Fostering

Website (BAAF) is also very useful:

www.adoptionuk.org

Adoption UK – organisation run by adopters for families affected by adoption

The Directgov website – information website about benefit entitlement **www.directgov.gov.uk**



**INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE**