



Thinking about Adopting?

Adoption Information and Reference Guide

There can be no greater reward than transforming a child's life forever and building a happy and fulfilled family.



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adoptioncumbria.org.uk



Introducing Ourselves

Thank you for requesting our Adoption Information and Reference Guide which we hope you will find useful. This will be the first of several packs of resource material made available to you should you choose to progress your adoption journey with Adoption Cumbria.

From April 1st, 2023, the local authority in Cumbria changed, with two new unitary councils replacing the previous county council and six district councils. The two new authorities are Cumberland, and Westmorland and Furness. The new authorities have decided it makes sense for a number of services to still be provided together across both new council areas, and adoption is one of these services. So, while the adoptions service staff will all be employed by Cumberland, we will provide services equally across both authorities. This means we can still provide the same level of service for children, adopters, adopted adults and birth families with little or no disruption. The information contained within this Guide is intended to provide background information and a starting point for those considering adopting a child. Please do not hesitate to contact us at any time if you have any queries or just want to speak to someone. If you require any of the information to be provided in another format, then please let us know and we will do our best to meet any individual needs you may have.

Adoption Cumbria provides a range of adoption services.

We:

- Recruit, train, and assess prospective adopters.
- Support prospective adopters through matching and the child moving into their adoptive home until the granting of an adoption order.
- Assist in the plan for adoption of children who are unable to be cared for within their birth families.
- Offer ongoing support to families following the Adoption Order which includes advice and information, assessments for specific services including therapy, workshops, support groups and family events.
- Work with adopted adults to help them to access their birth records and act as intermediary if they seek contact with birth relatives.
- Have a dedicated worker to support birth families during the adoption process.

Adoption Cumbria has a Privacy Policy which outlines what kind of personal information is collected, why and how it is used, the conditions under which it is kept, how long we keep it for, when we may share it with others, and your rights in relation to your information. Please ask for further information about the policy and how you can view this.



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Why Apply to Adoption Cumbria?

We are a hosted adoption service with extensive experience in placing children and approving and supporting adopters. Ofsted have rated our Adoption Services as 'good'.

- We offer a Cumbria wide service via four specialist teams: Recruitment and Assessment; Adoption Support, Panels and Permanence and Children's Adoption Team. We have offices based throughout Cumbria: Kendal, Barrow, Penrith, Carlisle and Workington.
- Due to the geographical size of the two unitary authorities, we are in the fortunate position of being able to place the children in Cumberland and Westmorland & Furness with adopters approved by Adoption Cumbria. This has many benefits in terms of matching and support. This is something that many other Adoption Agencies are unable to offer.
- We will contact you within 10 days of you making your initial contact with us.
- We aim to reduce the time children are waiting to be adopted. The majority of approved adopters will have a child living with them within twelve months.
- We have successfully moved a number of children into adoptive homes via the Early Permanence route.
- We offer a seamless service in that you will have support from the point of initial contact through the adoption process, and following the Adoption Order, from our robust and responsive Adoption Support Service.

Our Commitment to You

If you choose to progress with Adoption Cumbria on your adoption journey, we ensure you will have:

- A warm welcome.
- A personal, professional service throughout.
- Excellent training programme.
- Ongoing support whenever you need it.

What is Adoption?

Adoption is a way of providing a new permanent family for children who are unable to live with their birth family. The adopters become the child's legal parents once a Court makes an Adoption Order. An Adoption Order ends the child's legal relationship with his or her birth family and the child then becomes a full part of the adoptive family and takes the family's last name. Adoption is primarily a service for children. Children's needs are considered at each stage of the adoption process. It is about meeting the needs of children and not about meeting the needs of adults wanting to adopt. By deciding to adopt you are making a challenging, yet very rewarding decision.



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Early Permanence

Early Permanence is a potential route to adoption which involves prospective adopters fostering a baby or child initially. It is an umbrella term including both Fostering for Adoption (FFA) and Concurrent Planning.

Early Permanence allows a child to move at the earliest opportunity, in what is likely to be their permanent family. The adopters are initially approved as temporary foster carers for the child whilst the Court decides on the child's future plan, whether they are to be adopted or can safely return to the care of their family. If the Court agrees that the child should be adopted, the Adoption Agency must approve the 'match' between the adopters and the child.

Early Permanence is aimed at giving vulnerable children as much security as possible, and avoiding repeated moves before they can be adopted. Less moves within the care system increases the likelihood of the child developing a secure attachment. The uncertainty within Early Permanence is accepted by the adults, who need to be child centered and willing to manage the possibility of loss.

Early Permanence carers will need to be prepared and assessed as adopters. In addition, the assessment will explore their understanding of the fostering role, which includes working with birth parents and managing family time arrangements. As part of the assessment process, we provide comprehensive preparation training for prospective adopters who are considering offering Early Permanence to a child. This is supported by a specific handbook which supplements the training to provide applicants with all they need to know.

Intercountry Adoption

Adoption Cumbria does not undertake assessments for overseas adoption. We have commissioned a specialist provider to carry out this work on our behalf, as this will ensure an efficient and informed response in this complex area. They have their own social workers, who will prepare and assess prospective adopters, and there is a charge for this service.

If you are interested in adopting from abroad, please [contact IAC-The Centre](mailto:contact@icacentre.org.uk) for Adoption directly on their Advice line 0208 447 4753, or via their website www.icacentre.org.uk



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Non-Agency Adoption

Non agency adoption includes all those categories of adoption where the adoption agency and the adoption panel do not play a part in the placement of the child for adoption.

These are:

- Partner adoptions (formally known as step-parent adoption)
- Anyone who has had care of the child (for any three-year period in the past five years)
- Local authority foster parent(s) proceeding without the support of the adoption agency.

All non-agency adoptions have similar characteristics and there is a basic process to progress this via referral, counselling, provision of written information, assessment, and preparation of the Annexe A report for court. Depending on the type of non-agency adoption there may be extra elements included in the process and work.

Referrals relating to a non-agency adoption should be made via the multi-agency safeguarding hub for Cumberland 0333 240 1727 or Westmorland and Furness 0300 373 2724.

Who are the Children?

Adoption Cumbria has a recruitment strategy which identifies the current priorities in relation to the range of children who need adoptive families now and the predicted future need. Take a look at our website as this reflects these priorities.

Adoption Cumbria actively recruits adopters who are likely to meet the needs of those children within the two unitary Authorities who need an adoptive family.

We welcome enquiries from those who are in the early stages of considering whether adoption may be the right route for them.

Sometimes a single child will move into an adoptive home, other times there could be brothers and sisters together.

Some children will have health or medical problems and/or developmental delay whilst others may have physical and/or learning disabilities.

Today, most of the children needing new families through adoption will have complex family backgrounds and the courts will usually have been involved in the decision that they cannot safely return to the care of their birth families. Some children could have been living at home with family for some time before there were sufficient grounds or concerns to remove them. Some children have an adoption plan from birth due to the difficulties known in the family.



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The complex family backgrounds of these children will often involve one or a combination of the following:

- Misuse of drugs and/or alcohol
- Mental ill health difficulties
- Domestic Violence
- Parental learning difficulties
- Criminality

Consequently, the children are likely to have experienced some or all the following:

- Effects of drug/alcohol misuse by parents during the pregnancy or in the child's early years
- Neglect and/or physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse.
- Inconsistency, poor parenting, chaotic home environment, many moves and changes of caregiver.
- Special needs arising from disability or uncertainty about future development.
- Lack of a secure attachment with their main care giver.

These factors are likely to have impacted on their emotional and behavioural development and may well have long term implications for their future development, intellectually, socially and/or behaviourally. They may lack trust in adults and find difficulty in forming lasting secure attachments to their caregivers. Some of the children will have developed greater resilience than others – depending in part on other significant relationships in their lives – e.g., brothers and sisters, other adult relatives, or friends, foster carers.

Children who need adoption both within Cumbria and nationally will reflect the racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds of the population within the area from which they originate. When looking for a home for a child, we will try initially to identify appropriate adopters who will reflect the child's culture, language, and religion. However, we are mindful of the damage that can be caused to children by the delay in achieving a permanent home. Children will not generally be kept waiting in order to achieve an ideal match where a family can be identified who can meet most if not all the child's identified needs, this reflects Government guidance.



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Children's Profiles

Please read the brief profiles of some of our children needing adopters- it will give you an idea of the children's needs and experiences.

Anna aged 2

Anna was removed from her parents care at 10 months old and placed in a foster home. Both birth parents had a long history of mental health issues, birth mother suffered from depression and birth father was bi-polar. Birth mother originated from an Eastern European country. Anna's parents were living a chaotic lifestyle and not able to prioritise her needs. Anna presents as a happy, content and relaxed little girl. She sleeps well and is up to date with all her immunisations. She has some developmental delay although she is making steady progress in all areas. Anna is now walking and is having regular physiotherapy as she has showed some weakness in her muscle tone. We don't know how this will impact on Anna in the future. Anna has several health professionals involved in her care including a paediatrician, dietician, speech and language therapist and community nurse. Anna likes being cuddled and sung to. She has a good relationship with her foster carers and their children. She likes being read to; she especially likes fabric books where she can touch the different textures. Anna attends nursery two mornings a week and has settled well. She enjoys painting and her playtime in the water and sand pit.



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Carl aged 6

Carl has dark brown hair and big brown eyes; he is quite small in stature which is partly due to developmental delay. When he first came into foster care 18 months ago, he presented as very quiet and reserved with little speech, however with the support of his hearing aids and extra help in school, his speech, language and social skills are improving. Carl experienced significant neglect whilst in the care of his birth family. This has affected his physical and emotional development which means that he can present as being an extremely compliant little boy. Carl will need adoptive parents who can support him with being able to express his needs and feelings. Whilst Carl can be wary of new people, once he gets to know you, he relaxes and shows his outgoing, fun personality. Carl is aware that we are seeking an adoptive family for him, and he has stated that he would like a mum and a dad.

It is hoped that Carl will be able to have ongoing family time with his older sister once he has an adoptive home



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Who can adopt?

People from all walks of life can adopt. Many kinds of people adopt, essentially it is about the ability to provide a safe, stable, and loving home to a child for the duration of their childhood and beyond. You need to be able to be flexible and able to adjust your life and expectations to the needs of the child or children.

We welcome all enquiries from prospective adopters who live within Cumbria and may consider enquiries from those who live within an hour's travel of the Cumbria's borders.

Age

Legally you need to be over 21 to adopt. There is no legal set upper age limit though there is a reasonable expectation that you would be able to care for a child until they are a young adult. For this reason, we would want to look at the age gap between you and the child you wish to consider.

Domiciled and Habitual

Prospective adopters must be living in the British Isles or have been a habitual resident in part of the British Isles for at least one year. You will need to evidence that you have permanent residence.

Relationship Status

You don't have to be married to adopt. You could be divorced, married, in a civil partnership or living with a partner but we expect a couple will have lived together for at least 1 year, before progressing with an application, and be able to evidence an enduring relationship.

Families with Children

Having children already within your family is not a barrier to adoption. We welcome enquiries from experienced parents but will need to consider the impact of adoption on any existing children within the family. We would also expect an adopted child to be the youngest within the family and for there to be a two-year age gap between the adopted child and other children, as we know from research and experience that this works best.

Gender/Sexual orientation

We welcome applications from single people or couples regardless of gender or sexual orientation.



Lifestyle

Children who need adoption come from a variety of backgrounds, so we need adopters with a wide range of knowledge, experience, skills, and lifestyles. You can own or rent your home but there will need to be space for children to live and to play. Adopted children ideally will need their own bedroom. It would be very difficult for adopted children to share with a birth child already in the family. However, that does not mean that adopted brothers and sisters who are joining your family could not share a room if they have previously done so and the bedroom was spacious enough to accommodate them.

Employment

Whether you are working full time or are unemployed and receiving benefits your enquiry will be considered. It is important that you can demonstrate that you can afford to support a child. There may be grants and benefits that you are entitled to. If you are in work, we would want to know about your availability to meet a child's needs, as a child being adopted will need your time and attention.

Health and Disability

Having health issues or a disability doesn't exclude you from adopting so please don't rule yourself out before you have spoken to us. We will need to ensure that you have the ability to manage the demands of parenting. All applicants are required to have a medical assessment completed by their GP which will be considered by our Agency Medical Adviser as part of the approval process.

Smoking

Adoption Cumbria adheres to the practice guidance issued by Coram Baaf which states that adopted children under the age of five, or a child over the age of five with other conditions e.g. chest problems or disability do not live in a smoking household. The guidance also states that an adopter must have ceased smoking for at least 12 months before a child under the age of five can move in with them. Consequently, we would accept a Registration of Interest from applicants who have already stopped smoking for a period of 6 months. We may require evidence from your GP to confirm this. Adoption Cumbria also applies this guidance to the use of e-cigarettes.

Criminal History

Not all criminal convictions or cautions will prevent you from adopting as we will consider all enquiries on an individual basis. The key is to be totally honest from the onset. If you have offences against children, certain sexual offences against adults or significant offences of violence we will not be able to consider your enquiry.



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Fertility treatment

Many people come to adoption following the ending of fertility treatment and we welcome these enquiries. We would advise a gap between ending fertility treatment and starting an adoption application. We appreciate that the period needed can be different for different people from ending fertility treatment before you apply to adopt, in order to fully reflect on the different way of becoming a parent and what this will mean for you. Some people can be ready to adopt within a few months and for others it will take longer. If you are considering adoption, we would love to talk with you, understand your circumstances and help you work out the best approach and timing for you.

Pets

We undertake an assessment of all pets within the home and usually there would be no problem for pet owners adopting unless the pets are known to be dangerous. If you are a dog owner, we may ask for a professional dog assessment to be undertaken as part of the approval process. If you own many pets, we will want to be assured there are no health risks and that you have enough time to care for and prioritise a child.

Experience with children

We would like applicants to have some experience of caring for children, preferably around the age they are considering adopting. Not having experience would not necessarily prevent you from moving through the process at this stage, but we would be keen to know how you planned to get the required experience and would be happy to give advice and support on where to do this. As part of your assessment, we can offer a Preparing to Parent programme. This programme aims to give you an opportunity to develop your understanding of a child's developmental needs and give you an opportunity to build up your communication skills with children.



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Who do we need?

We need flexible, open, honest people who are able to consider a range of children and who can understand the difficult start these children will have had.

Adopters will need to appreciate that children will potentially come from a wide range of experiences, culture, heritage, and religions. The child may have brothers and sisters who live in different homes, also their birth parents may go on to have more children who also need to be adopted. Either way there may some sort of post adoption family time (staying in touch) between the brothers and sisters.

Adoptive parents need to be able to work alongside a range of other people, especially in the early stages, so it is important you can get along with people, listen and take advice from people who know the child/children or have professional knowledge which can help you in advising the best ways to meet the child's needs.

The steps to becoming an adoptive parent?

An overview of the Assessment Process

If your Registration of Interest is accepted, we can move you onto Stage one of the approval process. The Government has made some changes to the adoption process so that prospective adopters can be approved to adopt a child more quickly. There are two important reasons for these changes:

- To make sure that children live with the right permanent family as soon as possible
- To help the adoption process run smoothly and efficiently

Pre assesment stage Initial Enquiry/Expression of Interest

Initial Enquiries/Expression of Interest can either be made by telephone, online or in person. We will obtain your consent to enter your information onto our database so that we can progress your enquiry further.



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This **Information and Reference Guide** will have been provided to you at the enquiry stage to give you all the basic information you need to take the first steps as well as details about the whole process. However, if after reading this information, you still have some questions, then you will have the opportunity to ask these when your allocated Adoption Social Worker contacts you in response to your enquiry to arrange further discussions.

An **Initial Visit** will be completed by your allocated Adoption Social Worker. This will usually involve more than one meeting with you and may take place at an office as well as at your home and could also involve virtual meetings. We hope you will use these meetings to work out whether adoption feels right for you and your family and whether you wish to proceed. A report will be compiled following these meetings, and this information will then be used as part of the decision making at the next stage.

Registration of Interest Form (ROI) Following the initial visit, you will then be provided with a Registration of Interest Form (ROI) and should you wish to proceed further, then you will need to complete this form and return it to us. Once you have officially submitted your ROI form, we will let you know within five working days whether your ROI has been accepted. If we do not accept your ROI, we will provide the reasons why. If your ROI is accepted, we can move you onto Stage One of the approval process.

Stage One

When we accept your Registration of Interest you will move to Stage One. We will draw up a written agreement with you so that you are clear about what we expect from you, and as importantly, what you can expect from us, including timescales. Please remember you will have a designated Social Worker who will guide and support you every step of the way. In stage 1 we will be seeking checks and references. You will need to complete forms for these checks to be progressed and we need these to be completed as soon as possible.

At Stage One you will be expected to learn about topics related to adoption, and to attend a mandatory 3-day training course. We will also ask you to start completing an Adoption Workbook which we will provide to you. It is expected that Stage 1 will be completed within two months of the acceptance of your Registration of Interest

**“Our Social Worker has been very pleasant, informative and professional.
We feel confident and excited for the future” – Prospective adopter’s view at end of stage 1**



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Information regarding Checks and References

A **Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)** check (formerly known as Criminal Records Bureau) is part of the adoption approval process. Having an offence on record does not automatically exclude you from adopting. It is only the more serious offences, such as offences against children, violent offences, murder, or serious fraud that would legally bar you from adopting.

We understand that many people make mistakes, particularly in their youth, and so may have some 'history'. Any offences, other than the serious ones, will be treated with discretion and given consideration in light of the circumstances, nature of the crime, regularity and how long ago this happened. The important thing is that you are honest and open with us from the start.

Secondly, it is important that if you are adopting as part of a couple, your partner needs to know from you if there is anything in your offending history which could cause us concern. It may be that we turn you down as adopters based on your offending history, but we would not be able to tell your partner why. So please, tell us and tell your partner. Essentially, you cannot proceed to Stage Two where criminal record checks identify that you or an adult member of your household has been convicted of a specified offence committed at 18 or over or received a police caution that they admitted at the time, in respect of a specified offence (mainly offences against children).

If you have lived abroad for a considerable time, you may have to get confirmation that there are no records of you offending during your time there. You may have to get that country's equivalent of a DBS or another similar check for the time you lived there, and you may have to pay for this.

As an agency we will only retain your DBS information for a limited time, and all information is destroyed once a decision is made to proceed or not to proceed.

Medical Report: You will have medical forms to complete and take to your GP with instructions. You will be responsible for making the appointment for a medical examination. Your GP completes a form and sends it back to us, and we arrange for the Adoption Agency Medical Adviser (who sometimes sits on the Adoption Panel) to write a report on your medical fitness for consideration by the Panel. Medically there are few conditions that would result in an outright rejection of your application. Every case is looked at individually. However, the Medical Adviser will be asked to give an opinion on specific health needs – such as diabetes, kidney problems, heart conditions, mental health conditions and cancer. If necessary, they will ask your permission to communicate with your GP or specialist to discuss your case in more depth, before writing their report for panel.

We will seek references regarding any counselling you have engaged in.



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A special note on depression and other mental health conditions: prospective adopters often worry that because they have had some depression or other mental ill-health at some point

in their lives that this may preclude them from being adopters. This is not necessarily the case.

The Medical Adviser will look at each case individually and sympathetically in light of your history and a decision made depending on the potential impact of this on a child placed and the likelihood of a recurrence at times of stress.

The Medical Report will also look at your lifestyle, including alcohol consumption, smoking and obesity. Alcohol consumption will need to be within the accepted limits. With regard to smoking,

you are not considered a non-smoker until you have given up for over a year and smoking outside or using an e-cigarette still counts as smoking. Obesity issues can be more complicated; the Medical Adviser will check your BMI, but there is no set minimum or maximum.

The Medical Adviser is looking to be reassured that you have a reasonably active, healthy lifestyle. Weight issues are considered alongside other aspects of your health. In short, the Medical Adviser is generally looking for you to be fit and well enough at the point of adoption to care for a child through to adulthood.

Personal References: We ask for at least three personal references. They need to ideally be:

- From people who have known you for a significant period of time, both individually and as a couple.
- From people who have seen you interact with children.
- Two of the referees should not be related to you. These referees need to be happy to complete a written reference and be interviewed face-to-face by a Social Worker. If you have had some complicated issues in your life, we may ask you to provide additional references to verify certain parts of your history (see 'Former Partners' below).

Former Partners and Adult Children: If you have had a significant relationship with a previous partner, we would want them to provide a reference. If you cared for children with them (either your own or stepchildren), we will send a reference regardless of how long ago this was - unless there are serious risks to safety.

We fully understand how difficult this may feel for some people, but unfortunately there have

been some serious incidents including a case of a child death, whereby an adoptive father killed his adopted child. The subsequent case review established that his violent behaviour had been evident in his first marriage. The man's ex-wife stated that had anyone asked her, she would have told them of this. As a result, all



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adoption agencies need to check out previous relationships for any factors that might be relevant. The reference is done with discretion and with consideration to previous difficult circumstances; it forms only a part of a much broader assessment process.

If the relationship had been violent or you would become at risk by our contacting your ex-

partner, or if you genuinely have no contact details for your ex-partner, we will ask you to find us a supplementary referee who knew you at the time of the relationship who can verify your account of this time. If there are adult children from current or previous relationships, we would expect to contact them too.

Previous Addresses: We need to check with the local authorities covering all your previous addresses for the last ten years to see if you were known to them for any reason.

School Questionnaire: If you have a school-age child within the family we send a short questionnaire to their school checking that there are no concerns about the child. We would want to know that they attend regularly and that the parents are active in their communication with school when needed.

Health Visitor Check: We check with local Health Visitors if you are known to their service regarding children in the family.

Employment checks: We will seek a reference from your current employer. If you have done paid or voluntary work in any setting involving children or vulnerable adults, we will seek a reference from them also.

SSAFA check: If you have served or are currently serving in the Armed Forces or Reserves.

Social Media: We will complete a check of internet sites to access if information about you is available in the public domain. This will be discussed with you in the assessment process.

Finances: We complete a check of your finances to ascertain evidence of a stable lifestyle and the ability to manage on the income coming into the household. Adopters may have debts but so long as these are understood, and repayments can be managed alongside living expenses then this shouldn't be a problem. Openness and honesty about financial pressures is encouraged right from the outset of your application. We would encourage adopters to have considered how they will manage financially whilst taking time off work. It is possible to adopt and be in receipt of unemployment benefits or other benefits and in some circumstances financial support may be available from the adoption agency.

When you have completed Stage One, you will have a discussion with your Social Worker about whether to proceed further. Your social worker will then make a recommendation to the Team Manager, who in turn, will decide whether your application should progress to Stage two



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Why might we not progress to Stage Two?

Stage one is all about checks, references, and initial preparation. If there is anything of concern that has come from any of the checks, or matters raised by referees, these may need clarifying before you are able to move on to Stage Two. In some circumstances the result of these checks may mean that you are unable to progress, such as specific offences on your Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, or serious medical issues. If you haven't completed the preparation training or gained some childcare experience, this may delay your application moving on to Stage Two. If we decide not to accept you onto Stage Two, you will be advised accordingly and given the reasons in writing. If we do decide that you cannot progress, and you wish to make a complaint, you will be able to do so by contacting:

www.cumberland.gov.uk/your-council/have-your-say/make-complaint

Alternatively, you can raise any concerns about the process with the organisation, First 4 Adoption, which is a national service funded and supported by the Department of Education.

Stage Two

Stage Two: If we accept you, but you (or we) decide you need a break between Stage One and Stage Two, there will be a maximum time limit of six months. Where this break is longer than six months, you will need to restart Stage One. If we recommend that you should progress to Stage Two, then you will need to return the notification form to us within six months of receipt of this form for Stage Two to commence. You and your Social Worker will then sign the Stage Two agreement, which is the formal agreement to start Stage Two. It is during this time that your Prospective Adopter Report (PAR) will be completed. This is the report that will be presented to the Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker for their recommendation and decision about your approval. If you are approved, this PAR report will be used in the matching process and shared with Social Workers who are looking for adopters for children.

Stage Two should take no longer than four months to complete. During the course of this assessment period, you will attend the Stage Two Introduction to Therapeutic Parenting course and be given other learning opportunities – for example we offer an Early Permanence preparation training to applicants interested in this type of placement and we also offer a “Preparing to Parent” programme as detailed earlier in this Guide.

Within Stage Two there will be in-depth discussions about, and analysis of, your life experiences to date, which will be relevant to your capacity to parent a child who needs adoption. We will hold a session with your Support Network. Details on this process will be given to you at the time.



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Adoption Panel – Your application should be presented to the Adoption Panel within four months of moving to Stage Two. If for any reason there has been a delay; for example, if you have needed more time or training, or if life events have meant that you needed to pause for a while, then this timescale can be extended. The important factor is that you need to feel ready. The panel will make a recommendation to Adoption Cumbria on your suitability to become adoptive parents. You will be told of the panel's recommendation on the day.

Who are the Adoption Panel?

The Adoption Panel is made up of a variety of people with different personal and professional backgrounds. It is chaired by a person who is suitably qualified and experienced in matters of adoption, and who is independent of the Agency. Attending panel can feel quite daunting for prospective adopters, but you are invited (and encouraged) to attend. Your social worker will be with you throughout. Panel members will have read your Prospective Adopters Report and will have some questions to ask you and your social worker on the day. The panel will make a recommendation about your application in one of three ways:

1. They recommend that you are approved as adopters.
2. They recommend that you are not approved as adopters.
3. They defer the recommendation for some further work to be completed and make a date by which to return to panel. A similar process applies when you go to Adoption Panel to be matched with a child.

Who makes the final decision about being approved adopters or a match with a child?

The minutes of the panel will be sent to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) who is a Senior Manager. This person will read all of the papers submitted to panel along with the minutes of the meeting, before making the decision on whether you are to be approved as adoptive parents.

The ADM always takes account of the panel's recommendation before reaching a decision. This decision must be made within seven working days of the ADM receiving the final panel minutes. You will be verbally informed of the decision within two working days of it being made and will receive written confirmation within five working days. If the ADM decides not to approve you, then you will be told why in writing. You can, if you wish, ask for the adoption panel to reconsider your case, or you can apply to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) for your case to be newly considered. The IRM is a totally independent adoption panel whose members will read all of the reports submitted to the original panel (they do not see the minutes of that panel) and make their own recommendations to the ADM. The ADM will make the final decision.



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What happens once I'm approved?

Once you have been approved to adopt you will be assigned a worker from the 'Adoption Support Team' who will support you from this point. This worker will complete a 'handover' visit with your assessing social worker and draw up a 'Matching Plan' agreement which outlines how we will find the right match for you. Your social worker will also talk to you about what you can do to help identify a 'match' and this will also be included in your Matching Plan. This may include attending training, reading, or registering with Link Maker (see below). The 'Matching Plan' will also detail the level of contact you can expect from your social worker following approval. This will be a minimum of monthly contact by telephone or email and a home visit every three months.

How might you be 'matched' with a child?

- Your details will be included in Adoption Cumbria's database of approved adopters, and you will be considered for all suitable Cumbrian children waiting for adoption and those who have a plan of adoption and will need a home in the future.
- Adoption Cumbria will hold "in house" exchange days throughout the year where Cumbrian children will be profiled.
- You may also be invited to regional and national exchange days where children and adopters are profiled.
- Your social worker, with your consent, may also send out flyers and leaflets to advertise your availability nationally.
- After 3 months of being approved, you can also register on "Link maker" where you can add your profile and search for potential links.
- If appropriate you will be invited to Adoption Activity days which are fun filled days where children waiting to be adopted, their carers and social workers attend and meet approved adopters.

We know that the waiting period can be hard after the intensity of the assessment process, and it may seem that little is happening. It is important that you know we will be doing a lot of work behind the scenes to try and identify a 'match' for you. We hold a tracking meeting every month where all the children approved and in assessment and all adopters with a plan of adoption are considered. There are opportunities during the waiting time to further increase your knowledge of adoption and experience of children – through reading, training and practical experience. Your 'Matching Plan' will detail what you can do to develop your understanding of the needs of adopted children and also how you can be involved in identifying a 'match'.

The 'Matching Plan' will be reviewed with you every six months to ensure everything is being done to identify a suitable match for you. If you are still waiting for a match, your approval will be reviewed annually or following a significant change in your circumstances.



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This will provide an update on your current situation and will record any changes. Any significant changes to your approval criteria will need to be reconsidered by the Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker.

How do we link children with families?

When a possible match is identified the child's social worker will be given a copy of your assessment report (Prospective Adopter's Report) to see if what you can offer matches the child's needs. A 'matching meeting' will be held and if it agreed by the child's social worker and your social worker that you are a potential match for a child then you will receive more detailed information about the child in the form of a Child Permanence Report (CPR).

Child Permanence Report

The CPR will outline the child's history, their personality, their health and development. This report will also contain information about the child's birth family and the reasons why they have a plan of adoption. The proposed post adoption Staying in Touch arrangements for the child are also included, and you would need to agree with these for a match to proceed. Your social worker will guide you through the Child Permanence Report explaining the significance of particular issues. The CPR will also contain a photograph of the child.

If after reading the CPR you would like further information, the child's social worker will arrange to come and meet with you together with your worker. During the visit they will give you more information about the child and photographs may be shared. This is an opportunity to ask questions to consider whether this is the right match for you and the child's social worker will also be considering whether this is the right match for the child.

If you and the child's social worker both wish to proceed following this visit you will then be provided with any additional reports and assessments about the child including psychological, medical, and any school or nursery reports. You will have the opportunity to meet with the child's foster carer(s), have a telephone consultation with the adoption medical adviser and also speak with other relevant professionals involved with the child. This might include the child(ren)'s health visitor or teacher.

It may be appropriate, depending on the age and experiences of the child you are 'matched' with, to hold a Child Appreciation Day.



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Child Appreciation Day

This involves both past and current professionals and carers coming together to talk about their involvement with the child and more significantly the child's experiences. You will be expected to attend this day as it will be an opportunity to learn more about the child's experiences and consider how their past will have impacted upon them, as well as gaining the stories about the child which will be important for them but may not be in reports.

Once a decision is made by yourself and the child's social worker that a 'match' will proceed to the panel, then the child's agency will prepare an Adoption Support Plan and Adoption Placement Report, which will include the agency's reasons for proposing the match, the proposals for adoption support services and any proposed post adoption Staying in Touch. You will be asked your views on the post adoption Staying in Touch plan for the child as you will need to agree with this to proceed with a match.

Staying in Touch/Family Time

In most cases Staying in Touch will be indirect through Adoption Cumbria's adoption mailbox scheme, however there are some children for whom direct (Staying in Touch) Family Time is appropriate. If the child has brothers & sisters in adoptive homes, then direct Family Time/staying in touch will be explored and if appropriate will be part of their plan. In addition, there may be an expectation that a meeting will be held with the birth parents or significant birth family members. The meeting will take place in a neutral venue; the child's social worker and your social worker will also be present. There will be preparation for this meeting as both you and the birth family member may have questions. A photograph may be taken for the child's life story book. Meeting the birth family can feel daunting but there are many advantages:

- If you are going have (Staying in Touch) Family Time with the birth family member it may make writing to them easier.
- When the child is older it will help them to know that you met with their birth relatives, and this may help you answer any questions.
- You may have questions that you want to ask the birth family such as who chose the child's
- name.
- It may help you understand and empathise with the birth family as the information you have read in the Child Permanence Report can include difficult information about them.
- It can be reassuring for the birth family member to meet the child's new parent(s) and get a sense of the type of family the child is going to live with. This can stop them worrying about the child.



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The Adoption Placement report will include a section for you to add your views about the proposed move to your home. This documentation will be presented to the Adoption Panel. In preparation for a child's move to your home; your social worker will arrange the following:

- The Health and Safety checklist completed during your assessment will be updated to reflect the needs of the child.
- If matched with a young child, we will complete 'Safe Sleep' training with you. This is a training programme to provide advice to reduce the risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome).
- A 'support network' meeting will be organised by your social worker to ensure your family and friends are available to offer support and, in considering the child's needs, what type of support might be helpful. The role of your support network during introductions and the child moving in with you in the first few weeks will also be confirmed.
- Additional meetings with you may be offered to help you consider the child's needs and how you can meet these i.e., therapeutic parenting or using 'Theraplay' activities to promote bonding.
- You will be supported in completing a Welcome Book – an introduction book for the child which should be age appropriate and may include photographs of you, any children you have, pets, your home and the child's bedroom. It is expected that you will bring your welcome book to the adoption panel which is considering your match with the child. The child will be given your Welcome Book to look at with their carer to prepare for meeting you.
- Discussions around preparing any children already within your home for the arrival of a new child. You can also start preparing for the child(ren)'s move to your home.
- You may want to start making lists, making any necessary changes to the home, and obtaining any furniture and/or equipment required.
- If you have pets you will need to consider arrangements for their care during introductions.
- You will need to be prepared for the travelling that you will need to do during introductions as you won't be matched with a child who lives locally.
- You will need to ensure that you have prepared to take adoption leave and/or annual leave.



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Matching Panel

Before a child can be move in with you the Adoption Panel needs to consider the match. If the child is from another Local Authority, then the Adoption Panel will be held in that area. The Adoption Panel will consider the proposed match and make a recommendation to the agency decision maker. You will be encouraged to attend the Panel Meeting alongside your social worker and the child's social worker. The Agency Decision Maker must decide within seven working days and prospective adopters will be informed verbally on the date the decision is made and subsequently in writing. If the decision is that the child is not to be placed with you there is no mechanism for you to make representation to the IRM to review the decision, but the reasons will be explained to you.

Introductions

Introductions can only start once the Agency Decision has been made. The child should have been prepared for meeting their new family by their social worker, foster carer and using the Welcome Book you have completed.

Adoption Cumbria follows the UEA and Moving to Adoption model. This follows three key stages:

- Stage 1: Getting to know each other
- Stage 2: Making the move
- Stage 3: Supporting relationships after the move

The model is not prescriptive about timescales and is applied flexibly according to the child's needs. A formal meeting called the **Placement Planning Meeting** is arranged to consider the '**Adoption Placement Plan**' (APP). This APP details the introduction plan and ensures specific information is provided to you regarding exercising parental responsibility, support, Staying in Touch and reviews.

Advice for introductions

The introduction period can be physically and emotionally tiring for you. You may be travelling far, and you may have to stay in overnight accommodation. You will need to take care of yourselves.

At least one rest day will be included in the introduction period which is an opportunity for you to complete any last-minute preparations but also to give you time for reflection. It is important the child has a rest day to avoid becoming over tired. You must share any concerns or worries you may have with your Social Worker; however small they may seem. If you are part of a couple and are concerned about your partner, you need to make sure you talk about this together and share any anxieties with your social worker who will maintain frequent contact with you.



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After “Moving In”

The early days and weeks of a child living with you are life-changing and can be very exciting. However, they can also be exhausting and anxiety-provoking. Adoption Cumbria are very committed to providing adopters with high-quality support and we will make sure that you and the child or children you plan to adopt receive regular social work visits. Visits will be at least weekly until the first Child Looked After Review which is held within 28 days of the child moving in with you. After this, visits are made by the child’s social worker at least every 4 – 6 weeks and your social worker will also visit you. Following the initial Child Looked After Review the second review will be held within a further three months and then every six months until the Adoption Order is made.

Once the child has moved in with you though they are still ‘Looked After’ you will acquire partial Parental Responsibility for the child. You will have already been provided with a document which details what decisions you can/can’t make for the child. Parental Responsibility is shared with the birth parents and the Local Authority until the adoption order is granted. Your social worker will ensure you understand this thoroughly.

When everyone is happy that your child(ren) have settled within your family a decision will be made about the timing of the Adoption Order Application. You will need to complete the application form; the child’s social worker and your social worker have to complete a report called an ‘Annex A’ which will be sent to the court with the application form. There is fee for the Adoption Order application which your Social Worker will tell you about.

Timing of application

As an application can be made once the child has lived with you for ten weeks, in Cumbria we aim to complete the second Child Looked After Review at this point to ensure if everything is going well you are supported in making your application and there is no delay in progressing the final legal process for the child to become part of your family.

The Adoption Order

Once the application for an Adoption Order is lodged the Court will set a hearing date. Whilst you will get notice of this date you do not need to attend. The child’s birth parents may attend this hearing and legally they can request leave to challenge the making of an adoption order. Sometimes this means the court process can take longer as birth parents can make representation to the court. If this happens the court may make further hearing dates though once they have made the Adoption Order the child is legally adopted and you have full parental responsibility for the child.



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Celebration Hearing

Once the adoption order is made a Celebration Hearing will be arranged which you attend with the child and your family. The child's social worker and your social worker will also be present. The Celebration Hearing is a short informal hearing. Families often celebrate with an adoption party, special meal or outing. Many continue to celebrate the adoption day like an extra birthday, to help the child understand this part of their history.

Adoption Support Services

Adoption is a life changing event and life-long commitment. Although adopted children, like all children, require a stable, warm, loving, stimulating home, there is no denying that the difficulties they have encountered in their early stages of development, even if they were removed at birth, will affect their development in some way. We aim to offer adoption support that is flexible and useful – whenever you need it. You will have had an adoption support social worker who offered you support through matching and until the Adoption Order was granted. For those families needing ongoing support their worker will remain involved to offer any identified support after the adoption order is made. For other families the adoption support team can be contacted at any point following the adoption order being granted as you may need support at different times throughout the child's life.

The Adoption Support Team will remain in contact with adoptive families through regular communication which are emailed to adopters on our mailing list and contain information about training, family events, information and resources. The Adoption Support Team offers the following:

- Dedicated duty line Monday to Friday 9am until 5pm.
- Monthly Initial Assessments with social workers from the team where we can offer advice around telling, identity, therapeutic parenting, and other adoption related issues.
- Consultations with the 'Virtual School' around education issues. We can offer support to parents and schools around understanding the needs of adopted children.
- Consultations with family therapists/psychologist which can help us assess your support needs and provide advice.
- Assessments of Need for therapeutic services. Some families need additional and ongoing support, and a full assessment is completed to identify a package of support for your family. We can make applications to the Adoption Support Fund. This is a central



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government fund which will currently offers £2500 towards 'specialist assessments' and £5,000 towards therapeutic work each financial year. For more information visit

www.adoptionsupportfund.co.uk

- Stay and play groups for parents of younger children.
- Evening support groups for adoptive parents
- An annual Calendar of Events which includes training opportunities on adoption related issues like Staying in Touch, therapeutic parenting, identity, parenting teenagers, telling, and also family events which are opportunities to have fun, meet other adoptive families and for some children to have Staying in Touch/Family Time with brothers and sisters placed with other adoptive families.
- We can buddy up our adopters

Adoption Passport

In addition, the government published the 'Adoption Passport' detailing additional support available to adoptive families. This includes:

- Children adopted from care have priority access to schools (www.gov.uk/schoolsadmissions).
- Your child will also attract the Early Years Pupil Premium and Pupil Premium – additional funding to help meet their needs They will also be entitled to free early education from the age of two. (www.gov.uk/free-early-education).
- Many adopters are entitled to adoption leave and pay when their child moves in with them. This is now more similar to maternity and paternity leave pay, and it will include the right to take time off when you are meeting your child before they move in with you. (www.gov.uk/adoption-pay-leave).
- Adopters may have priority for council housing (www.gov.uk/council-housing).

Adopting a child from another agency

If you are approved by Adoption Cumbria who then adopts a child from another local authority area it is the child's local authority who are responsible for assessing your adoption support needs for three years after the adoption order is made. However, all adopters can access our training and support groups at any time.



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Adopter Stories

Sally, aged 45, single adopter

I always knew that I wanted to be a mum. I had a couple of serious relationships in my thirties where I'd hope to conceive but sadly this didn't happen. As I hit forty, I found myself single but still wanting to be a mum. I funded some private infertility treatment, but this wasn't successful. At the age of 43 I started to think about adoption. That first call to the agency was nerve wracking however I was immediately put at ease. I felt that my enquiry was valued, and this lessened my concerns about being able to adopt as a single woman who worked full time. I had now started my adoption journey with Cumbria County Council.

A social worker on the team contacted me within a few days of my initial enquiry and arranged a home visit. The visit was definitely a two-way process; whilst, as I expected, I was asked lots of questions I also had the opportunity to raise questions and was encouraged to do so. I was left feeling positive, informed and excited about the next step. I was also given the details of another single adopter for me to contact to gain some more information.

The training course was one of the hardest parts of the process for me as it brought to life the experiences of children who need adoptive families and the reality of being an adoptive parent. I particularly enjoyed listening to the adopters and foster carers who spoke on the course as they provided a real insight from first-hand experience. Being able to ask them questions was really helpful. The course was the first opportunity I had to meet other people who, like me, wanted to become adopter. The agency welcomed my request for my mum to attend the course with me which was important to me as she would be a significant part of my child's life and support to me as a parent.

After training the assessment sessions started which consisted of weekly visits. My assessing social worker was really knowledgeable. She guided me through the process setting work for me to complete between sessions and suggested appropriate reading material to develop my understanding and to prepare me for becoming an adoptive parent. Overall, I wasn't fazed by the assessment process and actually found it quite enjoyable – who else gets a dedicated two hours a week to talk about their life and experiences!

The assessment ends with going to panel. I knew what to expect but I was still nervous as being able to become a mum was so important to me. I was present when the panel considered my report and became emotional when I was told the panel supported my approval. I was so glad my mum was there with me to celebrate this.



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David and Daniel 35 and 39

It only took three months after approval when we got the call telling us we had been selected for a two-year-old little boy. I remember feeling numb when I phoned my partner at work to share the news.

The following day our social worker came to visit us and gave us information about our son. Whilst we had been told that we would get a lot of information we were impressed with the amount of detail shared with us at this stage. This helped us make the decision that we felt able to be his parents.

From this first visit the process moved quickly; we met our son's social worker, his foster carer and were able to have a meeting with his health visitor too. Our social worker supported us in all of the meetings and encouraged us to ask any questions we needed to.

Introductions were shattering – I remember feeling like I was on an emotional rollercoaster – did he like us? Did the Social Workers feel we could do this? Was the foster carer confident that we knew how to look after him? However, we were well supported by our Social Worker who was in daily contact with us, offering reassurance and guidance through this. The process is well managed with a detailed plan to ensure that both we and our son have time to get to know each other.

Our son has now been with us for 8 months and we now can't imagine how life was before he arrived! Adoption is a journey, and we still feel that we are on this journey. We are still learning and grateful for the ongoing support that is available to us, despite the Adoption order being now granted. We really enjoy the stay and play groups that the Team run as this gives us opportunity and our son to meet up with other adopters and their children. We are looking forward to the forthcoming Fun day to meet other families like us.



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Julie (44) and Peter (46)

I always knew that Peter and I would not have a biological child as Peter shared early into our relationship that he was unable to father a child. In my 20's having children wasn't at the forefront of my mind and we enjoyed a great life – highlights being getting married, renovating our home, travelling to foreign countries and building our careers. By my mid 30's I started to feel that something was missing from our lives. We started to think about the options available to us to become parents.

We attended an Adoption Information event, that was held in National Adoption Week. We were surprised to learn that adoption was something we could consider. The myths of adoption were dispelled, and we felt welcomed and that our interest was valued. 6 months after attending this event we took the plunge and made a formal enquiry. We used the time following the information event to consider what we had been told, discuss with each other and with our friends and families about what we could offer and what we could manage. Adoption definitely was something that was bigger than just us and having the support of our family was invaluable. With their support and with more knowledge from reading and researching the internet we decided that Early Permanence was an option we wanted to consider.

Our Social Worker guided us through the assessment process, which meant we always knew what to expect, what was coming next and how long everything was likely to take. It was much more enjoyable than I had anticipated and the day of Panel when we were unanimously approved will always be a treasured memory for me. It was like passing the test to be parents!

Now we are parents to our delightful 2-year-old daughter. She came to us via Early Permanence, and we have been a family for 14 months now. Life just gets better all the time – we can't imagine what things were like before she arrived! We are sure that we will face issues and challenges as she grows but what parent doesn't? We have already made links with the Adoption Support Team and attended some of the Workshops and events they run. It is reassuring to know that this support is there for us when and as we need it. Peter is already asking when are we going to adopt again!



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Frequently Asked Questions

We recognise that you may still have more questions to ask or need more time to think things over. You can check out our 'frequently asked questions' section on our website or give us a call. You may also wish to attend one of our adoption information events that are held regularly throughout the year. You can find information about these on our website.

How to complain

If you have a problem, please talk about it first to the person who provides your service.

Our aim is to deal with any complaints quickly and to your satisfaction. Your complaint will be taken seriously, no matter who you are or how you complain. Our staff can offer information and explain how the complaints procedure works. You can make your complaint in whatever way you prefer. If we need to have an interpreter to communicate with you, please do let us know.

We would also like to hear your feedback on the services we provide or if you have a suggestion on how we can make improvements. Your comments will be passed on to the services involved.

Contacting Us

Complaints - cumberland.gov.uk/your-council/have-your-say/make-complaint

Compliments - compliments@cumbriaadoption.or.uk



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