

**adoption  
counts** 

**Supporting  
families  
through  
adoption**

# **Adoption Counts**

## **Family Finding – Practice guidelines**



**Salford City Council**



## The Family Finder Role

The Family Finder in Adoption Counts is a defined role for qualified social workers. They work as a distinct team and each link to a designated local authority. Team managers in the main supervise both family finding and recruitment and assessment case work.

The family finder is not the case holding / statutory social worker for the child as this function remains in each local authority. Although, they are primarily responsible for liaising with a particular local authority they do need to work across these boundaries at times dependent upon allocation priorities and workloads.

Family finders are based in the spoke locations alongside staff in other functions but need to spend at least 1 day each week in the local authority / locality proactively meeting with case holding social workers, advising and overseeing the adoption progress of children and supporting the development of the Child Permanence Report. It is also a key part of their role to obtain information about the progress of families identified for adoption tracking and to ensure effective communication between the local authority and Adoption Counts is maintained. They will regularly attend local authority team / service meetings with a view to maintaining communication and oversight of permanency planning for each child.

Family finders, team managers and senior managers regularly meet with locality leads and other local authority staff as appropriate to ensure that adoption focus and understanding within care planning remains a priority.

## Early Identification of Children

Adoption Counts has a representative (either a team manager or senior practitioner) at each local authority's Legal Gateway meeting in order to ensure that it has awareness of all children where a decision has been made to initiate the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO process. This applies to children aged 8 and under, as well as children of 10 or under in exceptional circumstances. At this very early stage these cases are tracked with family finders communicating with case holding social workers to ensure information about the progress of assessments and the likelihood of care proceedings being initiated is provided. Management oversight ensures that valuable family finder time is not spent on cases where adoption is unlikely to be the plan for the child.

During this early tracking stage family finder input is escalated where indications are that parents and connected persons assessments are likely to be negative. Key triggers for further escalating family finder input are the accommodation of the child or a decision to initiate care proceedings.

Where this is the case family finders attend other key meetings, in particular legal advice / legal planning meetings.

Attendance at Legal Gateway meetings ensures that Adoption Counts is able to influence and assist with decision making and planning about early permanence /

placement opportunities for children where Foster to Adopt or Concurrency may be appropriate.

In addition systems are in place with each local authority to ensure that information about children who are not discussed at legal gateway is not missed, for example children at home under Care Orders where the plan is changed and children accommodated in an emergency.

### Tracking

Monthly Adoption Counts tracking meetings take place on an individual local authority or locality basis. These meetings, chaired by Operations Managers, consider and update the plan for each child on the Adoption Counts Tracker. Family finders and their team manager are required to attend tracking meetings with updated information about each child and the family finding strategy agreed, reviewed and recorded on the Adoption Counts tracker. (Appendix 1, Adoption Counts Permanence Tracker). Operations Managers will highlight from the tracking process practice issues or delays in care planning with a view to escalating these with identified service leads in each local authority. Judgements will be made about which cases need to be escalated in this way along with those where service level discussions between family finder and / or their team managers are considered sufficient. Operations managers will also monitor the role of the family finder, ensuring service standards and statutory requirements are met. This is with a view to driving out any avoidable delay.

Where children have waited any significant amount of time following Placement Orders being granted (especially those waiting longer than 12 months) regular updates will be provided by Operations Managers to the head of service about the progress of family finding. In some cases these children will be waiting for a change of their plan within the local authority and where this is the case regular communication and escalation in avoiding delay will be essential.

Adoption tracking meetings will closely monitor the following key areas:

- For children placed, timescales for submitting applications to court for the adoption order, progress of proceedings as well as life story book and later life letter.
- For children waiting on Placement Orders the actual time A1 and A2 timescales as well as the family finding strategy (in house / inter agency) and actions for each child.
- For children where there is delay the need for reviews and escalations into the local authority regarding timescales and changes of plan.
- For children in an active match, the timescale from shortlisting through to matching panel, introductions and placement.
- For children in proceedings the timescales for profiling children and the preparation of documents prior to SHOBPA.
- For children identified as eligible to Early Permanence Placements (Foster For Adopt or Concurrency) oversee practice and progress in line with the Early Permanence Policy.

### Family finding process prior to Placement Order

As outlined above Family finders are allocated to all children from Legal Gateway with a liaison brief at this early stage. They attend tracking meetings with up to date information about the case and care planning. For many of the children at the early stage (PLO / Pre Proceedings) the information is brief and further involvement unlikely but it is important that these children continue to be tracked in case there is an unexpected change in the plan for the child.

The family finder promotes and facilitates discussion from the earliest stage regarding opportunities to place children in Early Permanence Placements, either Foster For Adopt or Concurrency. Where a particular child is identified by the local authority for an Early Permanence placement the family finder will oversee and promote good practice (in line with the Adoption Counts Early Permanence Policy).

The family finder liaises with the case holding social worker to ensure that preparatory work is being undertaken e.g. sibling assessments, needs assessments, and early identification of connected persons who may need assessing as suitable carers. This early monitoring ensures that delay in progressing these assessments does not cause delay later in the process. Family finders will also keep up to date with care planning and likely permanence options for each child.

The family finder's role increases as the plan looks more likely to become one of adoption and once the child is accommodated or care proceedings have been initiated. They need to be present at key meetings within the local authority, including any care planning meetings where permanency decisions are being considered. They do not normally meet with birth parents or the child at this early stage, as this will remain the role of the case holding social worker.

Family Finders discuss cases in supervision with their line manager and at monthly tracking meetings. Where concerns arise about lack of early or effective permanence planning for a child these are escalated in a timely way to the Operations Manager who will raise with service lead in the local authority.

The Family Finder prepares the profile for the child within a timescale to be agreed with their manager. Every effort should be made to ensure that children who are most likely to have a plan of adoption are prioritised in terms of family finder time and for these children the profile should be prepared no later than three weeks prior to the "should be placed" decision (SHOBPA). This involves reviewing the information and undertaking a full assessment of the child's placement needs, taking into account the views of key professionals involved, i.e. the case holding social worker, their manager and the family finder's manager. It may be that in many cases this profiling will take place much earlier than this as timescales will be individual to each child and will be agreed via supervision and tracking meetings.

The family finder will also update the profile regularly to ensure it contains the latest and most accurate information about the child. For some children where there is likely to be delay in identifying a placement a more detailed profile will be prepared.

#### Family Finder Role – Key Tasks / Functions Prior to Placement Order

- Oversee and promote good practice in working with birth parents and informing them about the need for twin track planning for the child during court proceedings and obtaining relevant information about their histories and health for the Child Permanence Report.
- Provide support and advice for case holding social workers in completing Child Permanence Reports, advise on Care Planning and provide Family Finding statements for the Court. This function will seek to ensure good practice and maintain consistency and high standards. The initial quality audit of the CPR will be undertaken by the child's social worker's manager before the case is referred for SHOBPA at which point the Agency Advisor will use the CPR audit / checklist to quality assure the document. Suggested changes will be recorded on the audit / checklist and passed to the relevant ADM, child's social worker, their manager, the family finder and agency advisor to panel. The family finder will proactively oversee the improvements being made to the document in between SHOBPA and matching panel and the CPR will be audited again by the family finder / team manager prior to matching panel to ensure the changes were made. The CPR will be given an overall rating as indicated on the audit / checklist (Appendix 3: Audit Checklist)
- Drive timescales and processes in each local authority by working closely with the social worker.
- Oversee processes for undertaking adoption / permanence medicals with a view to avoiding delay.
- To oversee and consider the SHOBPA process, advising and supporting the preparation of the required documentation with a view to adhering to timescales and ensuring high standards of information to support the decision. To ensure, along with panel administration staff, that SHOBPA meetings are booked in advance. (Appendix 4: SHOBPA documents)
- Facilitate, advise and promote the need for input by the Adoption Psychology Team for children in assisting specialist assessments, e.g. sibling / attachment assessments. Input from this team will greatly assist with evidencing the children's needs and in finding an adoptive placement. The team can also advise on introductions and matching considerations, plus post placement support needs .
- Produce anonymous profiles of children, using information from the CPR, the case file, foster carers records and verbal discussion with social workers,

professionals and carers who know the child well. The family finder will ask the foster carer to complete / regularly update the C-RC form. Profiles will be updated regularly with oversight within tracking meetings and this will ensure that accurate and up to date information can be shared with prospective adopters prior to Placement Order being granted. The family finder will gather as much information as possible in preparing the child's profile at this stage.

### Family Finding Process after Placement Order Granted

The aim is for the majority of children to be provisionally matched prior to the Placement Order being granted.

Once the local authority has the legal consent to place the child for adoption the family finder becomes more directly involved in working with the child. They visit the child in placement and ensure the profile is up to date and accurate. Foster carers records and the C-RC form should be reviewed for any behavioural issues which would be of significance when sharing with adopters. In order to avoid delay, profiles are routinely shared (anonymously) with adoptive parents prior to Placement Order being granted. Where specific permission has been obtained from the court some profiles of children, including photographs and other identifying information, will be shared with prospective adopters prior to the Placement Order being granted.

CHARMS is the "in house" family finding tool for children and is being used in a way that creates visibility of children and adopters across the service for the purpose of identifying "in house" matching opportunities. Children are also profiled on Link Maker where it has been agreed by head of service that national / inter-agency family finding is needed.

Adoption Counts adopters are made visible on CHARMS from the commencement of Stage 2 of the recruitment process. The Strategic Matching process provides management oversight and ensures that priority is given to children from the Adoption Counts group of local authorities. For adopters where it has been decided via a management decision that they will be made available for inter-agency matches a referral is made to Link Maker.

Every effort is made to create visibility of adopters and children across the regional service with a view to avoiding localised decision making. Whole service monthly events take place in order to ensure that information about children and adopters within Adoption Counts is shared opening across the agency.

For certain children, categorised as likely to wait longer, a decision may need to be made to undertake family finding activity within the wider region or nationally at a much earlier stage or immediately. As a first step this decision would include other local authority adopters and if this is not successful in identifying a family a further decision may be needed to include adopters from Voluntary Adoption Agencies. This two step process is required due to the difference in the inter-agency fee's charged by VAA's and these decisions need to be discussed with operations managers and agreed by the head of service.

VAA partner agencies will also attend monthly service events with a view to considering those children where it has been agreed that the higher VAA inter-agency fee can be paid. Authorisation to progress a match with a VAA adopter is required from Head of Service and in making this decision the Head of Service will require evidence of the lack of “other local authority” and “in house” adopters

For Foster to Adopt and Concurrency Placements specific decisions will have been made at Care Planning Meetings about sharing information with prospective carers at an earlier stage. This is authorised within regulatory guidelines.

### Strategic Matching & Shortlisting

Within a Regional Adoption Agency there is a key responsibility to ensure that children are prioritised based on their level of need and that there is full visibility of all children across the region when making shortlisting / matching decisions.

A strategic matching meeting is held on a monthly basis which is attended by Team Managers, family finders and recruitment and assessment workers. All children currently subject to a Placement Order are discussed including those requiring early permanence alongside all unmatched approved adopters and those in the middle of Stage 2 and beyond.

Within this meeting the children will be highlighted who need to be considered by the adopters, using workers knowledge to prioritise children on Placement Orders who have been waiting longer. It may often be the case that recommendations are made within the meeting re: ranking the identified profiles in order of priority for the recruitment and assessment worker to then share with adopters. This process ensures scrutiny to decision making in ensuring that the children with the greatest level of need (in relation to timescales as well as other characteristics which could mean they will wait longer) are prioritised within shortlisting decisions. The strategic matching process is not designed to replace the existing family finding activity but to provide an additional level of oversight of potential matches before proceeding to the point of sharing information about a child with adopters.

Within 2 working days of the strategic matching meeting a spreadsheet recording all identified links for consideration will be circulated to managers, family finders & recruitment and assessment workers. The manager of the recruitment and assessment worker will ensure that the profiles of identified priority children have been shared with adopters. The family finders will also be aware following attendance at the meeting as to which adopters have been identified as potential matches for their children. Using their knowledge of the children and the family and with the usual level of supervisory oversight, the workers will usually identify an agreed best likely match and proceed to a shortlisting meeting.

Once a decision has been made at a shortlisting meeting to proceed with one chosen adopter for a child the child and adopters will be classed as “linked”.

### Family Finder Role – Progressing to Placement

The range of actions and activities undertaken by family finders are outlined below:

- Supporting foster carers to complete the CR-C form and Secure Base questionnaires, to enable a fuller understanding of the child's needs (Appendix 5)
- Advice on life story work, preparation of children for adoption and appropriate contact reduction plans. Adoption support colleagues may be involved at this stage.
- Refer children to activity days (where agreed at tracking meetings). All children who may wait longer will be considered for activity days. Consideration will be given to this at tracking meetings while agreeing the individual placement strategy.
- Attend Adoption Counts monthly strategic matching events. Present children's profiles and exchange information about in house adopters and children waiting with a view to identifying potential matches.
- Share Prospective Adopter Reports with case holding social workers.
- Arrange the short listing meetings and identify the short list of adoptive parents. A maximum of three adopters will be shortlisted and although the PAR's for the adopters on the shortlist will be shared with the case holding social worker prior to the meeting the family finder and their manager will have the responsibility for agreeing and finalising the shortlist. This will take place after attendance at the monthly strategic matching meeting. From this point on the case holding social worker will need to be involved in the decision about the best match. The shortlisting meeting can be chaired by a manager, senior / advanced practitioner or the family finder themselves, but the team manager for the family finder must have oversight of the decision and record as a management decision on the child's file even if not chairing the meeting. Best practice will be for the adopter's social worker to be present at the shortlisting meeting but if this is not possible or likely to cause delay the family finder will ascertain their views and feed these into the discussion. If the shortlisting recommendation is negative it is essential that discussion takes place with the adopter's social worker in fully exploring that decision and incorporating their views along with those of their manager. (Appendix 6 – Shortlisting Meeting Template) Please note that when shortlisting, any adopter who has been approved for 2 children cannot be shortlisted for a single child without RAA Head of Service agreement.
- Provide advice and information about the child to assist with the decision making process within the short listing meeting and to produce minutes of the meeting to evidence the decision making process.
- Oversee and drive an agency timescale of 6 weeks (maximum) from the shortlisting decision to the date of matching panel.



- Liaise with Adoption Support colleagues who must be consulted and involved in planning the support needs of any child where there are likely to be specific support needs, e.g. a child with additional needs.
- Share anonymous information (unless we have a Placement Order or agreement to disclose identifying information) with the identified first choice family.
- Undertake first visit with the social worker to prospective adopters to further inform matching process
- Plan foster carer visit to adopters with social worker to provide further information about the child
- Arrange and facilitate a life appreciation day for the child/ren and prospective adoptive parents to ensure that prospective adopters have the opportunity to meet all the people who know the child / children so that they have a full picture of the child's needs and day to day life, for example medical advisor to panel, health visitor, family support workers, educational staff, foster carers, IRO's, portage staff.
- Arrange a 'mini meet' prior to attending panel if it is deemed to be appropriate. This can be an opportunity to start to build the emotional attachment between the prospective adopter/s and the child/ren.
- Support and encourage the relationship between the foster carer and adoptive parents at the earliest opportunity to support the child's transition and transfer of their emotional attachments. Encourage the exchange of information before, during and after introductions to build on the relationship and to support the adopters in the early days of placement.
- Attend matching meeting which must be chaired by a team manager with a view to ratifying the match prior to panel. The meeting should also be attended by the child's social worker and where possible the adopters social worker. If the latter is not able to attend or this will cause delay their views must be incorporated into the meeting via the Matching Meeting Report (Appendix 7)
- Assist with matching panel booking, advise social worker of panel deadlines in terms of gatekeeping to ensure that timescales stipulated in service standards are met.
- Oversee and provide advice on the preparation of life story work.

- Ensure all relevant information is shared with the adopters and their social worker. Ensure effective communication and liaison is maintained.
- Assist social worker in completing matching documentation and specifically Adoption Placement Report ensuring appropriate input from case holding social worker and adopters.
- Attend panel with case holding social worker and present evidence for the match.
- Arrange a meeting between prospective adopters and relevant family members at an appropriate time. Recognise that this is a highly emotive time for all involved and ensure that all parties are prepared and supported with this.
- Liaise with adopters and their worker to provide welcome book / talking book appropriate to child's age / development. Discuss with foster carer how to use welcome book with the child and prepare other information about the adopters for the child's preparation (photographs etc)
- Agree and plan draft programme of introductions with adopter, foster carer and professionals. For certain complex placements over significant geographical distance or siblings a specific meeting will be convened to plan the best approach to introductions.
- Attend inter-agency planning meeting (chaired by team manager). Present plan of introductions for discussion and agreement. (Appendix 10)
- Continue regular liaison with all professionals throughout introductions to ensure any concerns are addressed and attend mid way review. Chair mid way review in absence of team manager
- Ensure that adopter, foster carer and social worker feedback about progress of introductions is obtained prior to mid way review and placing the child to inform decision making about progressing to placement. Escalate concerns where necessary.
- To make a referral to the letter box coordinator and oversee the process and timescales for Life Story Book and Later Life Letter. Where these are delayed the family finder will escalate concern via their manager.

### Recording

All family finding activity will be recorded on the local authority case file for the child. This will ensure that the relevant information within the child's journey is held in one place.

Family finders will therefore have access to the relevant local authority systems and will record all key events and actions undertaken. Key documents should also be uploaded to the child's file. These will include the child's profile, shortlisting / matching documents, all panel documents and panel minutes.

Shortlisting and matching decisions will be clearly recorded on agreed templates and uploaded to children's files. Identifying information about the chosen adopter will be held on the child's file but this will not be the case for adopters who are not progressing after shortlisting. Therefore, this information will be removed from the shortlisting document before it is uploaded to the child's file or later removed if the match does not subsequently proceed.

### **The child's workflow process in CHARMS**

The child will be entered onto the CHARMS system at the point where the team manager (or delegated worker) provides business support with the information required to create the record. This will usually be following attendance at legal gateway in the local authority. All children must be entered onto the system at the latest by the time an ICO is granted. The key information required is:

- Name
- Ethnicity
- Date of Birth
- If part of a sibling group
- Name of child's social worker
- Name of family finder (if allocated)

Once the child has been created by business support the updated information needed as the child progresses through the process will be entered by the family finder. The points in the journey where updates are required are:

- Date the child became looked after (if already known at the time the child is created BS will enter this)
- ICO Date
- Initial profiling date (matching considerations to be entered at this point)
- Subsequent child profile dates (with updates to matching considerations)
- Final care planning meeting date
- Date of SHOBPA decision
- Date placement order granted
- Date referred to Link Maker (if decision made by head of service to commence inter agency searching)
- Date the child is linked (following shortlisting meeting where one adopter is identified)
- If linked with an inter-agency adopter the family finder must create the adopter on CHARMS
- Date of Matching Panel
- Date of matching Agency Decision (will be entered by Business Support)

- Date placed (at this point the family finder must complete the placement screen)
- For Early Permanence Placements – if placed in a foster for adopt or concurrent placement the family finder must complete the placement screen at the point this placement commences and must then update this with the date the child is subsequently placed for adoption (date of matching agency decision). The new placement must then be created

## **Find a Family**

CHARMS will be used as the in house tool for finding a family for all children, other than those where a decision has been made to look for an inter-agency placement. The process that family finders must follow in using CHARMS for this purpose is outlined in the Family Finding User Guide for CHARMS (Appendix 13).

## Appendices

1. Adoption Counts Permanence Tracker
2. Child's Profile Template
3. Audit Checklist Tool for CPR's
4. SHOBPA documents / bundle
5. Shortlisting Meeting Template
6. Matching Meeting Template
7. CR-C form
8. Format – Inter Agency Planning Meeting
9. Format - Mid Way Review of introductions
10. Family Finding Flow Chart
11. Strategic matching / shortlisting process (flow chart)
12. Charms User Guide for Family Finding