

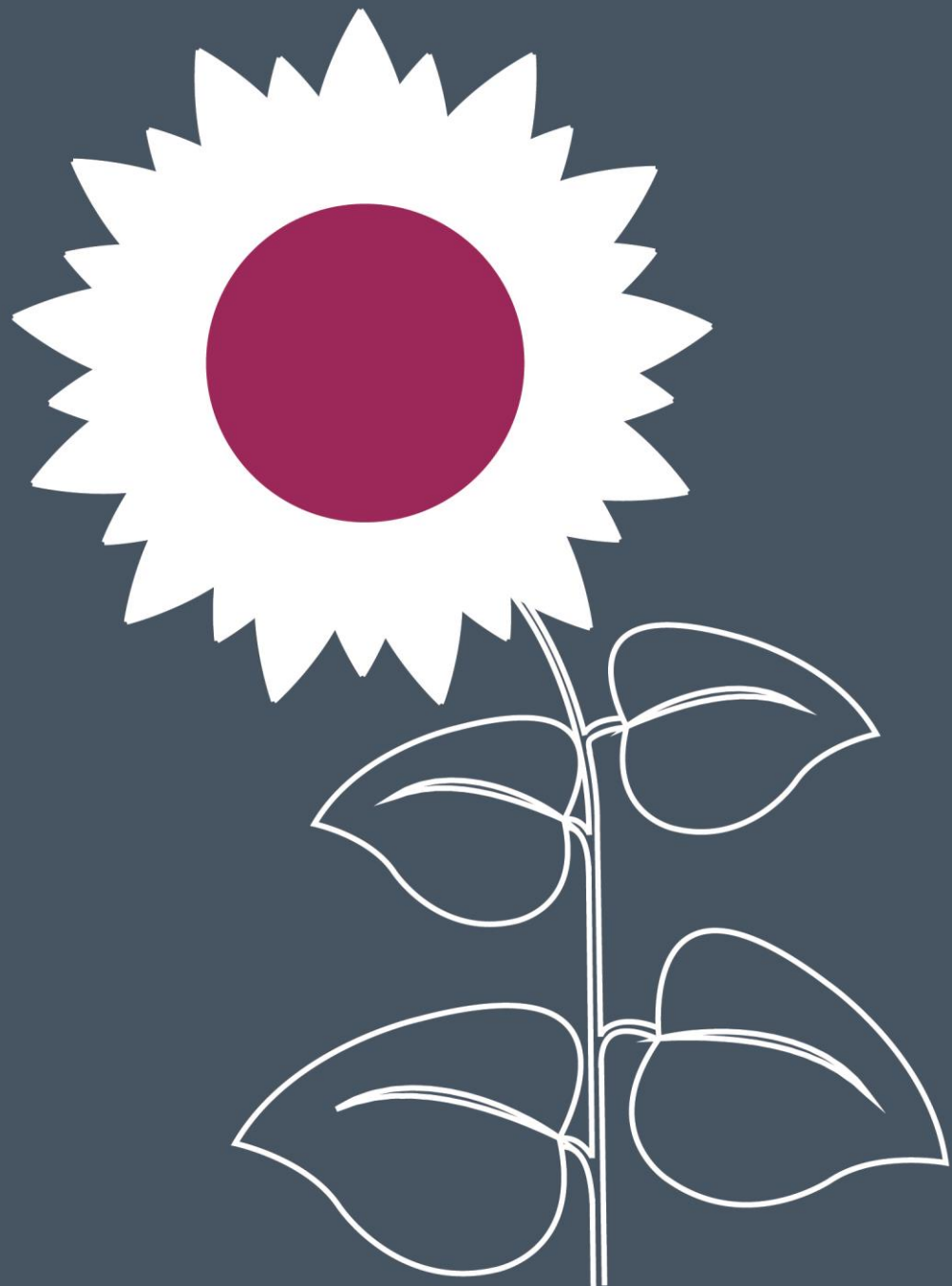


City of
Stoke-on-Trent

CONTACT

Tri x 5_2_24 February 2021

Review February 2022



Statutory Guidance Chapter 7

1 NMS 8 - Contact

Desired Outcome:

That contact with birth parents, siblings, other members of the birth family and significant others is arranged and maintained when it is beneficial to the child

- 1.1 When the agency is authorised to place a child for adoption, there is no general presumption for or against contact. Contact arrangements should be focused on the child's needs with the views of the prospective adopters and birth family members taken into account.
- 1.2 Contact arrangements may need to be varied as the child's relationships and needs for contact change over time. The arrangements will be reviewed in accordance with the adoption support plan.
- 1.3 In most cases where the plan is for a child to maintain contact with a family member, it is expected that the adopter will take responsibility for ensuring contact takes place as agreed in the Adoption Placement Plan and that no ongoing support from the Adoption Team, either financial or staff, would be required.
- 1.4 However it is recognised that in some cases this will not be possible, either because of the complexity of the arrangements, or because additional support is required. Support for contact in these circumstances may be provided directly (facilitating visits and meetings) or indirectly (facilitating the exchange of letters, cards and background information).
- 1.5 Children, prospective adopters, adopters, birth parents and members of the birth family should be helped to understand the harm unauthorised or unmediated contact, including through online social networks, can have and will be supported if unauthorised contact is made. Prospective adopters should be prepared in case this happens and be supported if it does happen.

2 Summary of Contact Arrangements Provisions

- 2.1 The Child's Permanence Report should include:
 - The child's wishes and feelings regarding contact with a parent, guardian, relative or any other significant person

- The wishes and feelings of the parent, guardian, relative or any other significant person.
 - The proposed contact arrangements and the agency's views on them. This should include details of the proposed frequency of contact, whether in-direct contact is to be one way or two ways, if photographs are to be included. Details of any risk assessment completed in relation to contact.
- 2.2 When a child is matched with prospective adopters, the views of the prospective adopters about the proposed contact arrangements should be ascertained. The Adoption Placement Report should include details of the proposed contact arrangements.
- 2.3 The Panel will consider the contact arrangements when considering whether the child should be placed for adoption and, when the matching decision is considered and the Adoption Placement Report is presented. The Panel may give advice to the agency about the proposed arrangements.
- 2.4 The Adoption Placement Plan should include all contact arrangements.
- 2.5 The following people should be informed of contact arrangements:
- The child if of sufficient age and understanding
 - The parent or guardian
 - Any person who had a contact order under the 1989 Children Act
 - Any other relevant person
- 2.6 All reviews should consider the existing contact arrangements and whether they should be continued or altered.
- 2.7 The Practice Directions report to court when the adoption application is lodged should include details of contact arrangements and, if plans have changed since the original care plan, the reasons for those changes.

3 Direct Contact

- 3.1 Direct contact may continue once a child has been adopted if it is an established arrangement and is in the best interests of the child. Direct contact arrangements must be agreed prior to the match between adoptive child and prospective adopter, although plans may be revised and amended according to the need and circumstances. As a general principle contact plans should ensure the burden of travelling is shared equally between parties unless the needs of a specific child mitigates against this.

- 3.2 Some direct contact arrangements may be managed between the involved parties, whilst others may require the involvement of the agency either through indirectly facilitating the arrangement or directly supervising the arrangement.
- 3.3 The support required for any direct contact arrangements should be considered as part of the Adoption Support Plan. This may involve:
- Financial support through the adoption allowance or one off payments
 - The agency acting as an intermediary between the parties in setting up the arrangement
 - Transportation of involved parties
 - Provision of a facility for the contact to take place
 - Supervision of the contact

Direct contact between adopted siblings

- 3.4 In most cases it is expected that the adopter takes full responsibility for ensuring contact takes place as agreed in the Adoption Support Plan and no expenses would be paid unless:
- The journey is over 50 miles (travel expenses only)
 - The distance and needs of child requires an overnight stay (travel expenses and accommodation only)
 - The number of children involved in the arrangement gives rise to exceptional costs
 - Any costs incurred will be reimbursed at the subsistence rates established by the Agency.

Direct contact between adopted child and siblings in care

- 3.5 In some cases the adopted child will maintain contact with siblings who are in care. This contact will need a significant level of support, particularly if the siblings retain contact with birth parents. Where the contact takes place with siblings as part of their care plans, the child's social worker is responsible for ensuring the children in care are properly prepared for the contact. Support for the contact may include:
- Supervision of the contact which will be provided by the social worker of the children in care.

- Expenses (mileage, accommodation, agreed activities) incurred by the foster carer or small group home on behalf of the sibling in care which will be paid by the Children in Care Team.
- Expenses incurred by the adopter for contact agreed in the Adoption Support Plan, which will be paid by the Adoption Team on submission of an expenses form where :
 - ✓ The journey is over 50 miles (travel expenses only)
 - ✓ The distance and needs of child requires an overnight stay (travel expenses and accommodation only)
 - ✓ The number of children involved in the arrangement gives rise to exceptional costs.
- Any costs incurred will be reimbursed at the subsistence rates established by the Agency.

Direct Contact with other siblings

3.6 Direct contact may be maintained with siblings who reside with relatives on Residence or Special Guardianship Orders. Such contact is likely to require a significant level of support, particularly if the siblings retain contact with birth parents.

3.7 Where there is no other social worker involved with the siblings, the Adoption Support Team will be responsible for ensuring that siblings are prepared for the contact. Support for the contact may include:

- Where the contact needs to be supervised, supervision will be provided or organised by the Adoption Support Team.
- Expenses incurred by the adopters for contact agreed in the Adoption Support Plan which will be paid by the Adoption Support Team on submission of an expenses form where:
 - ✓ The journey is over 50 miles (travel expenses only)
 - ✓ The distance and needs of child requires an overnight stay (travel expenses and accommodation only)
 - ✓ The number of children involved in the arrangement gives rise to exceptional costs.
 - ✓ Any costs incurred will be reimbursed at the subsistence rates established by the Agency.

Contact with Adult Birth Relatives

3.8 The contact plan may be for the child to retain direct contact with a birth relative. Such arrangements will need a high level of support.

3.9 If the contact needs to be supervised, supervision will be provided or organised by the Adoption Support Team unless the contact also includes siblings who are in care, whereby responsibility for supervision will be shared with the relevant CIC Team.

3.10 Expenses incurred by the adopters for contact agreed in the Adoption Support Plan will be paid by the Adoption Support Team on submission of an expenses form where:

- The journey is over 50 miles (travel expenses only)
- The distance and needs of child requires an overnight stay (travel expenses and accommodation only)
- The number of children involved in the arrangement gives rise to exceptional costs.
- Any costs incurred will be reimbursed at the subsistence rates established by the Agency.

3.11 The Adoption Support Team will give consideration to the need for financial support for birth relatives where this may be necessary to enable the contact to take place.

Contact with Foster Carers

3.12 It is often in the adopted child's interest to maintain contact with their foster carers. In these circumstances:

- Expenses incurred by the foster carer should be discussed and agreed with the Service Manager - Fostering and will be paid by the Fostering Service.
- Expenses incurred by the adopters for contact agreed in the Adoption Support Plan will be paid by the Adoption Support Team on submission of an expenses form where:
 - ✓ The journey is over 50 miles (travel expenses only)
 - ✓ The distance and needs of child requires an overnight stay (travel expenses and accommodation only)
 - ✓ The number of children involved in the arrangement gives rise to exceptional costs.

Goodbye Contact

3.13 If direct contact will not continue when a child is placed for adoption, it is worthwhile considering having a final direct contact with the family of origin and the child. This can provide the child with permission to join their new family. It

is also an opportunity to take photographs that can assist the child when the adoptive family begin talking to the child about their family of origin.

One off meeting with adoptive and birth family members

- 3.10 A one off meeting between adoptive parents and the family of origin provides an opportunity for the birth parents to feel reassured about the child's new parents. It is important to take photographs of this meeting as these will help in talking to the child about their family of origin. This meeting should ideally take place before a child is placed for adoption or soon thereafter.
- 3.11 If a one off meeting is not planned, the reasons should be recorded on the Adoption Placement Report.

4 Indirect Contact

- 4.1 In the past the making of an Adoption Order was considered to be final and all contact between children and their family of origin was severed. Nowadays however, most children placed for adoption have indirect contact known as Post Box Arrangements.
- 4.2 Indirect contact in Stoke-on-Trent is managed through the Stoke-on-Trent Adoption Post Box System
- 4.3 The Adoption Post Box System is managed by the Adoption Support Team and provides a service by which letters, cards, information and photographs may be exchanged between parties as agreed on either a voluntary basis or as ordered by the Court. The exchange of information is usually offered until the adopted child reaches 18 years of age. The arrangement may continue after the adopted child reaches 18 years of age if this is requested by the adopted person.
- No other items, e.g. parcels/presents will be exchanged.
- 4.4 The Service Manager for Adoption is responsible for overseeing the Post Box Service, supported by Team Manager of the Adoption Support and the Adoption Support Social Work Assistant.
- 4.5 For an adopted child an exchange of information can help the child to:
- Keep up links with a significant birth relative
 - Understand more about his/her background
 - Keep up to date with changes and events in his/her birth family

- Accept what has happened and deal with fantasies or myths about the birth family
- Prepare for possible future contact as an adult

4.6 For adoptive parents an exchange of information can help them to:

- Find out information not available at the time of the adoption e.g. medical information
- Provide answers to questions from the child using more up to date information about the birth family
- Assist the child to develop a positive sense of identity
- Enable the child to make new attachments by acknowledging the old ones

4.7 For a birth parent or relative an exchange of information can help them to:

- Find out how their birth child is developing, progressing at school etc.
- Inform the child about changes in their own lives
- Deal with their loss by being reassured that the child is safe, well and loved
- Maintain links with the child
- Remember the child is growing and developing rather than being “stuck” at the age they last saw each other
- Prepare for the possibility of contact when the child reaches adulthood

4.8 Indirect contact may exist between the child and:

- A birth parent
- A sibling
- A significant birth relative
- Foster carer

4.9 The exchange of information is normally between the adopters and the birth family although with older children may involve some exchange of information with the child.

4.10 As part of the placement planning, consideration should be given to:

- What form the indirect contact will take i.e. letters/cards/photographs.
- No items should be exchanged which identify details about the adopters, their location or the child's school
- How frequent the indirect contact will be
- Whether the birth family write to the child or to the adoptive parents
- What form of address should be used for the birth family e.g. First names
- What updating information will be provided
- Under what circumstances the contact will cease e.g. wishes of child

- 4.11 The Post Box Arrangements may commence once the child has been placed for adoption.
- 4.12 The Practice Direction Report to Court in relation to the application for an Adoption Order should include details of the contact arrangements with reasons. Any variation from the final Care Plan must be explained in full.

5 Post Box Procedure

- 5.1 When the Adoption Order is made the child's social worker should ensure Post Box Agreement Forms have been completed by the prospective adopters and any other parties to the agreement. The agreement should clearly specify who the agreement is between and what is covered by the agreement.
- 5.2 The Post Box agreement should make clear whether the contact is a voluntary arrangement or whether it has been ordered by the Court. Where a Court Order exists a copy should be held on the Post Box file.
- 5.3 Each party should be given the relevant Post Box Contact leaflet which explains the process.
- 5.4 All parties should be asked to inform the Agency if there any changes of address or circumstances.
- 5.5 Each party to the Agreement should be given support about what to include in their letters. Guidance is given in the Adoption Post Box leaflet.
- 5.6 A separate file for each arrangement will be set up which will be securely stored in a lockable filing cabinet in a lockable room.
- 5.7 The Post Box Co-ordinator will maintain a record of all Post Box Agreements detailing when the indirect contact will occur, the parties to the indirect contact and what will be exchanged.
- 5.8 When the exchange of information is received, it will be opened and the contents read by the Post Box Co-ordinator to ensure the contents are suitable to be passed on to the other party. Where there are concerns about the contents, the Post Box Co-ordinator will contact the birth relative or adoptive family and will advise them about the concerns to give the opportunity for an alternative to be provided or to counsel the recipient about what may be distressing information and how it should be handled. Any unsuitable contents or contents outside of the Post Box Agreement will not be passed on.
- 5.9 If information is sent which requires translation or conversion to Braille, this service will be provided by the local authority.

- 5.10 If there are no concerns about the contents or the concerns have been addressed, any letters will be copied for the Post Box file. Any items which are exchanged should be recorded on the Post Box file case record.
- 5.11 If the recipient is the adoptive parent, the original will be forwarded to them. If the recipient is the birth parent, the original will be retained until the birth parent requests either in writing or by telephone that the information is forwarded to them. This is to confirm the birth parent's current address and their readiness to receive the information. This information should then be recorded on the child's Post Box File by the Post Box Co-ordinator.
- 5.12 If no exchange of information is received during the agreed month of exchange, the Post Box Co-ordinator will send a reminder letter. If there is no response to the reminder the Post Box Co-ordinator will attempt to discover the reason for the lack of contact e.g. illness or other change of circumstance. The Post Box Co-ordinator will inform the other party that no information has been received but will advise that the other party continue to send information as contact may be resumed at a later stage. Such information will be retained on the file and will be available to the adopted child if they choose to access their adoption file on reaching 18 years of age.
- 5.13 If any forwarded information is returned to the agency as not known the Post Box Co-ordinator will be informed and will attempt to discover the reason for this e.g. failure to notify of a change of address.
- 5.14 If any urgent information e.g. serious illness or death needs to be exchanged outside of the Post Box Agreement frequency, the Post Box Co-ordinator should be contacted by the concerned party who will discuss with the Team Manager of the Adoption Support team who will make a decision about the transfer of the information.
- 5.15 The Post Box exchange of information usually ends when the child is 18 years old. Any continuation beyond 18 years would require the consent of the adopted person who will then legally be an adult.
- 5.16 When closed, the whole of the Post Box file will transfer to the child's adoption file, which is then kept for 100 years from the date of the Adoption Order.

6 Support for Contact Post Adoption

- 6.1 Children's needs for contact may change after the Adoption Order has been made, or planned arrangements may become problematic, and adopters or adopted children may seek help with these arrangements.
- 6.2 Referrals about adoption contact arrangements must be made through the Front Door and Assessment Team (FDA). If the referral is made directly to the

Adoption Support team, information should be passed to the FDA Team and if there are no safeguarding issues should then be referred to the Adoption Support Team for an assessment. Decisions about support to be provided for contact or any variations in arrangements, will be made by the Adoption Support Team following the assessment.

7 The implications of social networking and developments in technology.

- 7.1 Social networking sites, smart phones, gaming devices with wireless connectivity and other technological developments will continue to be a challenge for children, their adoptive parents, birth parents and social workers.
- 7.2 Adoptive parents need to be helped to understand the implications of these developments and to recognise that there can be no guarantee that their identity can be protected.
- 7.3 A risk assessment tool is available when drawing up contact plans.
- 7.4 Resources for adopters and adopted children are available through BAAF.