

**Family Placement Service**

**Adoption Support Policy**

**Children’s Services**

**Northumberland County Council**

County Hall

Morpeth

NE61 2EF

**TEL: 01670 626262**

**Children’s Services**

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**Policy in respect of:**

**Adoption Support covering:**

* **Types of adoption support**
* **Requesting support**
* **The Assessment process**
* **Financial support**

Date of Approval: February 2019

Implementation: April 2019

Date of Review: March 2022

# 1. Introduction

From 1 December 2018 adoption services from North Tyneside, Gateshead, Newcastle, Northumberland and South Tyneside councils will be delivered by Adopt North East, the regional adoption agency. Adopt North East brings together the best practices from each local authority and will provide excellent adoption services that transform children’s and families' lives for the better.

Adopt North East delivers the following services across the five local authority areas:

* Recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters
* Matching and placement – to match prospective adopters with children in need of adoption
* Post placement and post adoption order support
* Support and advice to all affected by adoption
* Develop and manage all forms of post adoption contact between adopted children and birth families
* Step parent adoption
* Inter-country adoption.

To help support families, children and young people, ANE will provide a wide range of services and will signpost families to the right service at the right time. With the assistance and support of ANE, adoptive parents are encouraged to seek available support as and when necessary.

# 2. Types of Adoption Support

**Life Story Work**

Life Story Books are prepared for children so that they have a child friendly record of their life in words, pictures, photos and documents. Life Story Work helps children separated from their birth families to acknowledge and make sense of their past experiences from birth to adoption. The resource serves as a helpful tool which enables adopters to explain and answer questions that children may have about their early life.

It is important for children to have a record of significant people, places and events in their life so that they can understand the person they are. Where possible, children will also receive a treasure or memory box including a collection of special and significant items which they can look at, touch, smell and listen to.

Once the Life Story Book is completed, it is shared with adopters by the allocated social worker. Additional support and advice is available on how and when to share the book with the child.

**Later life Letters**

Later Life Letters are written by the child’s social worker and should be given to the adopters no later than 10 working days following the Celebration Hearing.

The purpose of a Later Life Letter is to give the child a first-hand account from their social worker detailing the reasons for their adoption and why decisions were made about their care.

The Later Life Letter can be viewed as a link between a child friendly Life Story Book and the more formal Child Permanence Report (CPR). The aim is to share the letter at an appropriate time for the child.

Support is available from ANE for all adopters on when and how to share this in conjunction with the Life Story Book.

**Contact**

ANE has a ‘Post Box Worker’ who coordinates and oversees the exchange of letters and cards from adopters to birth parents and vice versa. Support in writing letters is provided to adopters from ANE. The Post Box Worker checks all letters received from birth parents, prior to sending them to the adopters, to ensure they are in accordance with the agreed contact plan. Contact plans can be reviewed at the request of the adopters.

**Junior ISA**

Junior ISA’s (Individual Savings Accounts) are long –term tax-free savings accounts for children. They are for building assets rather than day to day savings. The Share Foundation, a registered charity, has been authorised by the Government to set up and manage the Junior ISA. The Government has contributed £200 for each eligible child.

The money in the Junior ISA belongs to the child however they cannot withdraw the money until they are 18 years old. If the child chooses not to withdraw the money, the Junior ISA will automatically become an adult ISA.

Once the adoption order, in respect of the child has been granted, the Local Authority notifies the Share Foundation and responsibility for managing the account transfers to the adopters.

**Education**

**Free Education for 2 year olds**

Good quality child care and education can reduce the gap for some children who have had a less advantageous start in life due to poor care provided by their birth families.

Children who are adopted or who are placed for adoption are eligible, from the age of two years, for free early education and care places (up to 15 hours a week) during school term time. Some early education providers offer free hours in the school holidays, for example children could access 11 hours each week for 51 weeks of the year. ANE will support adopters access to childcare in line with their free entitlement.

**Virtual School**

We view education as a high priority to enable children to reach their full educational potential. Education is the key enabler for children to improve their life chances, and this is very important for children who have been in care.

Our Virtual School is the champion of good education outcomes for Northumberland's looked after, previously looked after children and care leavers. There is no Virtual School building but we do share some features of a ‘real’ school. There is a workforce which includes the Headteacher, the education support for looked-after children (ESLAC) team, and Designated Teachers for looked-after and previously looked-after children in all our schools and academies.The virtual school is a service that has skilled professionals and mentors who work with local schools to support the educational needs of children in the care of the Local Authority. Where necessary, the team can liaise with the adopter’s choice of school to assist with any admission difficulties.

ESLAC can also work in partnership with a designated teacher to develop a Personal Education Plan (PEP). This will ensure that the child(ren)’s needs are managed effectively and that the transition to a new school is supported appropriately.

**Pupil Premium**

The child’s school will also receive Pupil Premium. This is additional funding for publicly funded schools in England to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The pupil premium is attached to all children adopted from care and supports in closing the gap between them and their peers.

**Health**

All looked after children have regular health and dental checks. The consultant paediatrician has an overview of the child’s case and is available to meet with adopters to discuss any health issues or implications for the care of the child.

The Health Visiting Service provide good support to adopters and can arrange access to additional support, e.g. health routines, weaning, bedtime routines, play.

**Therapeutic Support**

In some cases children require specialist support to help them deal with issues arising from their early experiences and to support their transition into a forever family. All adopters have access to universal services including the Children and Young People’s Service (CYPS) who have specially trained professionals who can undertake the relevant work.

Where CYPS identify specific support from other professionals, ANE will commission services via the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to meet those needs. The requirement for a commissioned service is established thorough assessment of the child(ren)’s needs and in consultation with the adopters and professionals involved with the child. ANE will be responsible for completing this assessment of need.

**After Adoption Support**

ANE will offer a wide variety of support to adoptive families including advice, training, group work, individual work and family fun days.

**Financial Support**

Children who are placed for adoption may have had difficult early life experiences which could make their future care more demanding than is usual for children of comparable age. A robust package of social work and professional support is usually sufficient for most adoptive children.

Typical support of the nature outlined in Section 1 above does not usually require the payment of funds to adoptive parents, however, the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 (referred to in this document as “the Regulations”) stipulate that financial support can be paid to an adoptive parent for the purpose of “*supporting a placement or the continuation of adoption arrangements after an adoption is made*”.

One-off payments may be provided to meet:

* Costs associated with introductions to a child will be paid by ANE.
* The local authority will provide assistance to adopters of £170 for the Adoption Order Application fee. Where there is a challenge from a birth parent at the point of application for the Adoption Order the local authority will provide financial assistance for legal fees up to the limit of £500. Applicants will be required to provide confirmation that the fees they are paying are at legal aid rates.
* A one off specific assessed need for example, to provide furniture and domestic equipment needed to accommodate a child. In most cases, this payment will not exceed £250.
* A series of ongoing costs to meet a specific assessed need for example, recurring travel costs relating to contact between child and a related person.
* Other expenditure for the purpose of integrating and settling in an adoptive child into their new environment. This may include alterations to and adaptations of the home, provision of means of transport and other items necessary for the purpose of looking after the child.

Generally, these one-off types of financial support are not subject to a means test, but if a significant amount of financial support was requested, the local authority will require adoptive parents to be financially assessed where permitted under the Regulations.

# 3. Adoption Allowances

The Regulations also stipulate that ongoing financial support may be paid where necessary to support the adoptive placement. An ongoing payment is referred to as an adoption allowance. This will usually be considered in situations where:

* There are additional long term costs associated with caring for the child to what might otherwise be expected for a child of similar age. This may be for example, due to illness, disability, emotional or behavioural difficulties or the continuing consequences of past abuse or neglect.
* Where it is necessary to ensure that the adoptive parent can look after the child, for example, a period of time not working whilst the child becomes established within the family unit.
* It is to facilitate a timely placement for a child where the age or ethnic origin of the child is proving to be a barrier to placement. This may include situations which allow sibling groups to remain together.

Further details of the eligibility criteria needed to qualify for an adoption allowance are set out later in this policy document. In all cases, the primary consideration in determining any payments will be the needs of the child. With the exception of former foster carers, financial support will typically not include any element of remuneration for adoptive parents. See section 8 below in relation to remuneration that may be paid to foster carers.

The Regulations permit local authorities to impose conditions on what allowance payments can be used for and how long they can be paid. We may also require adoptive parent(s) to provide receipts as proof that any financial support has been used for the approved purpose.

# 4. Requesting Support

When considering proposed adoption placements, adoption support will be detailed in the adoption support plan. This will include all levels of support, for example, practical, emotional and include any financial support.

Adoptive parents are also entitled to request a revised Assessment of Need at any time, up until the child reaches the age of 18 years, if they feel additional support is needed.

Adoptive families living outside of Northumberland can request support from the Council for up to 3 years after the adoption order was made providing the child was previously looked after by Northumberland County Council. After this date, responsibility for support falls to the Local Authority for the area in which the adoptive family now lives.

Where financial support for an adoption allowance has been agreed by another local authority or the adoption order was supported by another local authority, Northumberland will not assume responsibility for the allowance should that child move into Northumberland. Such support will remain the responsibility of the originating authority and subject to the originating authority’s financial assessment. Equally where the adopters and the child for whom Northumberland is paying an adoption allowance prior to the adoption order and the family moves from Northumberland, we will continue to pay the allowance subject to the child’s assessed needs, financial assessment and annual review process.

If during the adoption process it becomes clear that additional support may be appropriate; potential adopters will be asked to complete an Adoption Support Financial Assessment form. Please note that completing the form will not automatically entitle adopters to financial support. Adopters will be notified of the outcome of any assessment and the reasons why any decisions have been made.

In completing an Adoption Support Financial Assessment form, it is important that adopters read and understand the information provided in this Policy. As has already been indicated, an ongoing adoption allowance can only be payable where the child has an exceptional need as defined in section 2.

# 5. The Assessment Process

Assessing a family’s needs will be overseen by the Finance Panel whose role is to ensure allowances are paid in accordance with the Adoption Support Policy and meet the assessed needs of adoptive children. A detailed Terms of Reference for the Finance Panel is set out on page 13.

Parents already in receipt of support or those wishing to be considered for help, must complete an Adoption Allowance Support form. The purpose of the form is to establish a household’s circumstances so that an appropriate level of support can be determined, it is therefore essential that the form be completed in full.

Assessments are typically overseen by the Family Placement Service, who will be able to provide help and assistance to parents and prospective adopters when completing forms. As Northumberland’s policy is based on the needs of the child, each case is unique, but factors that will be taken into account when deciding whether an allowance is appropriate will include:

* The nature of any identified needs and whether these are being met by existing Health or other Local Authority provision
* The costs of providing for the child’s assessed needs
* The resources (including financial resources) available to the parents
* The financial needs and resources of the child

In determining whether financial support is necessary, a child's needs will be considered alongside the family income and outgoings. This will help Panel calculate whether the funds available to the family are sufficient to address any additional needs the child may have.

Details of this process are set out below.

# 5.1 Needs of the Child

As Northumberland’s approach is based on the needs of the child, it is essential that the reasoning behind applications for support are clearly set out alongside what any adoption allowance payments would be used for.

It should be noted that an adoption allowance is not a benefit parents are automatically entitled to and that typically financial support is not paid to remunerate parents for caring for children, however, in exceptional circumstances, the Finance Panel may consider offering financial support for a transitional period in order to ease any strains on a household and prevent hardship.

For example, we expect families to take advantage of statutory adoption support alongside any support available from their employer when a child is placed, however, in some cases a child may benefit if a parent takes a period of additional leave from employment. If taking an employment break results in a strain on the household budget, which cannot be covered by child benefits, tax credits and other funds available to the family, then Panel may consider offering an allowance for a temporary period. Each case will be assessed on its own merits and a ‘blanket’ approach cannot be assumed.

Please note that requests for support based on a child’s health or behavioural needs, must involve regular additional costs over and above a child’s everyday needs, for example, spending incurred on health issues, special diets, replacement bedding & clothing, transport costs for medical visits.

# 5.2 Income

All income must be declared and documentation provided to support figures disclosed:

* Gross annual salary and Net figures (for both partners in the case of couples) must be disclosed, figures should include overtime and other earnings, for example, bonuses, dividends.
* When providing Net figures, an average based on the last 3 payments should be used and the 3 most recent payslips should also be provided.
* Those self-employed must provide an Inland Revenue Approved Statement of Earnings for the previous tax year alongside their application. A statement of expected earnings for the current year may also requested. This will allow the assessment of income for the year ensuring that it is not expected to be substantially different from the previous year. The statement can also be used if a full year’s Inland Revenue statement is not available, i.e. new business

# 5.3 Benefits, Allowances & Pensions

Applicants must declare:

* All benefits and allowances including Income Support (IS), Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), Universal Credit, Parents Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Housing Benefit, Sickness Benefit and any Adoption or Fostering Allowances already in payment.
* All state and private pensions (including those paid for disabilities)
* Adoptive parents on low incomes are expected to apply for Child Tax Credits and Child Benefits when a new placement commences and these must be included as income. Where an application for Child Tax Credits is pending, the family will be assessed without this income in place, however, if Panel subsequently agree an allowance is appropriate, it will initially be awarded for a 3 month period, after which a further assessment will be carried out and any child tax credit in place at this time will be considered when determining an agreed adoption allowance payment.
* Parents whose circumstances appear to meet the criteria for child tax credits, but who fail to declare the receipt of any benefits risk having the adoption allowance suspended until appropriate evidence of non-entitlement is provided from DWP.

# 5.4 Equity, savings and investments

If applicants have assets, savings or investments (including property) these must be declared alongside any income associated with the investment. This will include income from lodgers, tenants, sub-tenants or rental income.

# 5.5 Financial resources associated with the adopted child

Parents of children with a disability are expected to apply for a DLA/PIP and where appropriate to also approach their Local Authority for help and assistance with social issues such as personal care, respite and help with leisure activities. Any financial help offered by Northumberland will compliment and not duplicate wider support available to parents, consequently whilst any funding or support families receive in meeting a childs ‘social care needs’ including any Direct Payment or Personal Budget will not be counted as a source of general income, the support package in place will be taken into consideration when determining whether the child's needs warrant any additional help from Northumberland.

Money received under a Maintenance or Separation Order, or from the Child Support Agency is also classed as income under the assessment and will be included in our calculations.

Finally any lump sum payment or Trust Fund held in the child’s name must be declared, along with any other regular payment received in respect of the child, however it will not affect allowance payments.

# 5.6 Household Expenses

All regular payments and monies paid out to support the household should be declared, this will include the following:

* Monthly Mortgage / Rental costs
* Council Tax – most Councils charge monthly for ten months only, so if a monthly figure is given, it will be multiplied by ten to give an annual figure. If a rebate is given, the net figure must be declared.
* Gas, electricity and other utility costs
* TV telephone and Internet bills
* Food and clothing
* Travel expenses
* Any commitments under a Court Order include such things as payments made under a Separation or Maintenance Order.

If there are any additional expenses not covered in the above classifications but to which applicants are already committed prior to the adoption being made, or which are related to the placement, they can be declared.

Note that each case will be considered on its own merits and some discretion may be applied. Panel also asks that adopters submit bank statements or other documentation to support any costs listed.

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# 6. Duration of Payments

All payments of an adoption allowance will be reviewed on at least an annual basis, but if a family’s personal or financial circumstances change, for example, if the child leaves home or if the household finances change because of a new job, the adopters must immediately notify the Family Placement Service of the change. Failure to promptly notify the Council of any change could result in any overpaid allowances being reclaimed.

Families receiving an adoption allowance will be contacted annually and requested to complete a new financial assessment form. The reassessment will also look at whether the need which the allowance is addressing is still in place and whether it is being adequately managed. The Council may approach families for receipts or documentation to ensure funds are being used in accordance with any defined conditions.

Payment of the allowance will be suspendedor may cease if:

* requested documents aren’t returned
* the defined need is no longer deemed to continue
* changes in adopters’ financial situation means that they no longer meet the criteria for payment of an allowance.

As previously stated, adopters are free to request a new Assessment of Need at any point but generally entitlement to an adoption allowance will cease once a child reaches 18 years of age.

# 7. What adoption allowance rates are payable?

It should be noted that the allowance payable may change over time according to the adopter’s financial situation, the needs of the child and in line with any revisions to Northumberland’s agreed adoption allowance rates.

Adoption Allowance rates are based on Northumberland Fostering Allowances minus child benefit.  The age bands relate to the age at which the child is placed for adoption and the rates represent the maximum amount a household will receive. The actual amount paid will be calculated by reference to the factors set out in Section 4.

The payment will not automatically increase. Instead, payments will be assessed as part of the annual review process to establish whether the payments need to increase or decrease due to the needs of the child at that time and the other factors set out in section 4 above.

# 7. Sibling Groups

Sibling groups do not automatically qualify for an adoption allowance. Where payment of an adoption allowance is authorised to facilitate the placement of a sibling group, it is expected that financial support for this reason will be short term and will normally be necessary for no more than 2 years in order to ease the strains families may experience introducing sibling groups into the household. When undertaking the annual review of financial support, the Council will need to be satisfied that a financial payment remains necessary to support each of the children in the placement in order for payment to continue.

# 8. Transitional arrangements for Foster Carers

Financial support cannot include remuneration to adoptive parents. If a foster carer makes the decision to adopt a looked after child that was placed with them by the agency, any allowances being paid will cease once the child is placed under adoption regulations. An adoption allowance will only be considered if the eligibility criteria is met and will be subject to the same adoption allowance conditions.

Financial support may include an element of remuneration as outlined in the Adoption Support Regulations where the parent/s have been a local authority foster carer in respect of the child and an element of remuneration was included in the payment made by the local authority to the adopted parent in relation to them fostering the child. This will however, cease to be payable at the end of a period of two years from the making of the adoption order.

Former foster carers cannot retrospectively seek remuneration payments.

# 9. Notification and Payment

Any proposed payment of adoption allowance will need approval of the Finance Panel. The Agency Decision Maker may in exceptional circumstances agree to a payment other than provided for in this policy where this is necessary in order to meet the needs of the adopted child.

Adoptive parents will be formally notified of the outcome of all assessments.

If it is agreed that the payment of an adoption allowance is appropriate, details of the proposed payments, along with any conditions, will be set out in the adoption support plan. The support plan will accompany the outcome of the decision; adopters will be required to sign and return a copy of the formal Financial Support Agreement.

# 10. Appeals

In the event that an adoptive parent disputes the decision of the Council regarding the provision of adoption support, they may request that the matter be formally reviewed by the Agency Decision Maker. Families must make appeal requests in writing within 28 days of being notified of panel outcomes; the appeal must clearly set out the reasoning behind the appeal i.e. which elements of panel outcome the family disagrees with. Appeals will be considered within 28 days of receipt, families will be formally notified of outcomes and the basis behind the final decision making process.

To ensure families are not unduly penalised, where an appeal results in a panel decision being overturned, payments to adopters will be backdated to the date of the original decision.

# 11. Responsibility

The Family Placement Service has responsibility for the maintenance of this policy, which will be reviewed on an annual basis.

*Next review date: April 2020*

**Family Placement Finance Panel**

**Terms of Reference**

**Overall Objective**

To ensure all offers of financial support to child arrangement carers, special guardians and adopters are paid in accordance with the relevant financial policies and meet the assessed needs of children and their families.

**Purpose**

1. To consider new applications for adoption allowances and to review existing allowances paid to adoptive parents.
2. To ensure all offers of financial support meet agreed criteria and reflect the ongoing needs of the child.
3. To consider all special guardianship and child arrangement allowance applications and to annually review existing allowances paid to carers.

**Functions**

1. All payments of an adoption support allowance will be reviewed annually by the Family Placement Panel. Assessment will be based on the information outlined in the revised assessment and incorporating up to date information on children's needs and family finances.
2. All payments of special guardianship and child arrangement allowances will be reviewed annually by the panel. This will be based on the financial means assessment.
3. In cases where a reassessment highlights that a families circumstances have changed such that criteria for an allowance are no longer met, the allowance will cease, either with immediate effect. It will only be in exceptional circumstances this may be on a tapered basis.
4. Families who fail to provide updated information may have any allowance already in payment suspended or stopped. This includes failing to provide evidence to confirm the child is still in the care of the carer, special guardian or adoptive parents.
5. Allowances will automatically cease if:
* the financial review determines that the allowance should cease
* the child ceases to have a home with the carer, special guardian or adoptive parent
* the child ceases full-time education and commences employment
* the child qualifies for income support or job seekers allowance in their own right
* the child reaches 18 years
* the child marries
* the child dies
1. All carers will be informed of the panel decisions, in writing, within 14 working days of the Panel review. Where circumstances indicate a change of rate of allowance is appropriate, this will be conveyed in writing within the same timescales.
2. Any appeal against the original panel decision must be made within 28 working days of receipt of panel decisions. Appeals will be acknowledged, in writing, by the Agency Decision Maker upon receipt and will be heard within 28 working days.
3. A final Agency Decision Maker decision will be conveyed in writing to the child arrangement carers, special guardians or adoptive carers within 14 working days of the case being reviewed.

**For further information contact:**

**Northumberland County Council Children’s Services:**

Phone: 01670 626262

familyplacement@northumberland.gov.uk

Family Placement Services - Children’s Services

Northumberland County Council

3 Esther Court

Wansbeck Business Park

Ashington

Northumberland

NE63 8AP

**Should this document be required in a different language or a format suitable**

**for people with sensory impairments the service will make arrangements**

**to provide this.**