Adoption England
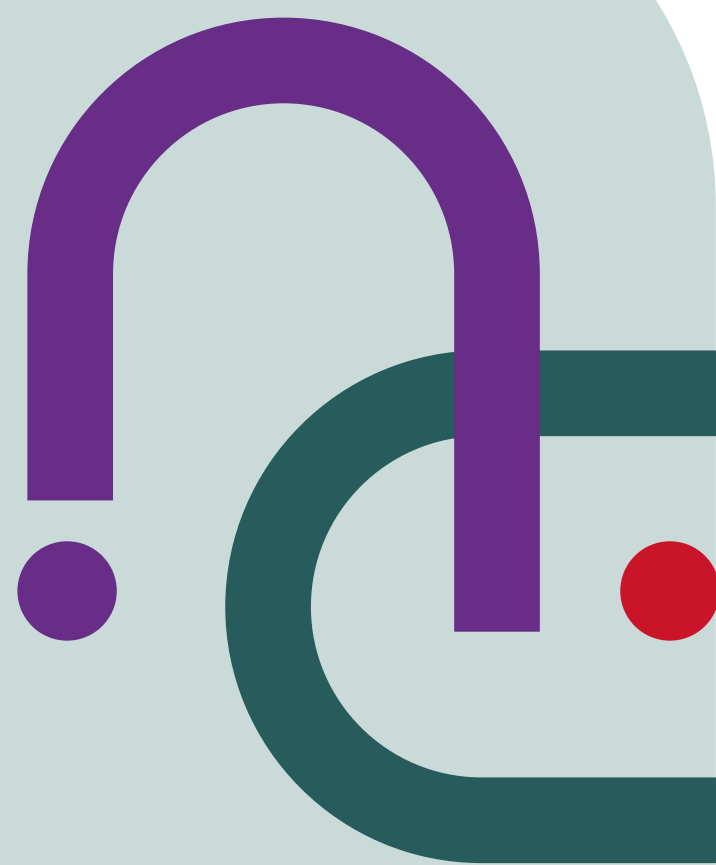
regional adoption agencies working together

National Practice Standards for Staying in Touch/Contact

Contents

Foreword

Adoption is changing. We now understand more than ever how important it is for adopted children to stay connected to the people and relationships that matter to them. These National Practice Standards for staying in touch (SiT)/contact have been developed to make sure that this happens and that a child's voice, identity, and connections are at the heart of adoption practice.

Modern adoption is more than a legal process; When a child is adopted, they gain a new family—but they can also lose contact with their birth family, their history, and their identity. Instead, children should be able to keep safe and meaningful connections with people who are important to them, preserving the golden thread of relationships that support identity, belonging, and emotional wellbeing. These standards show how we can support that.

It's not just about how many connections a child has, but the quality of those relationships. A few strong, safe, and trusted connections can make a big difference to a child's wellbeing and sense of identity, and these relationships help children understand who they are and where they come from. Digital platforms and social media are a big part of children's lives in the world today, and if we don't help children manage their relationships safely and supportively, they may try to reconnect with people online without guidance — sometimes in ways that could be confusing or unsafe.
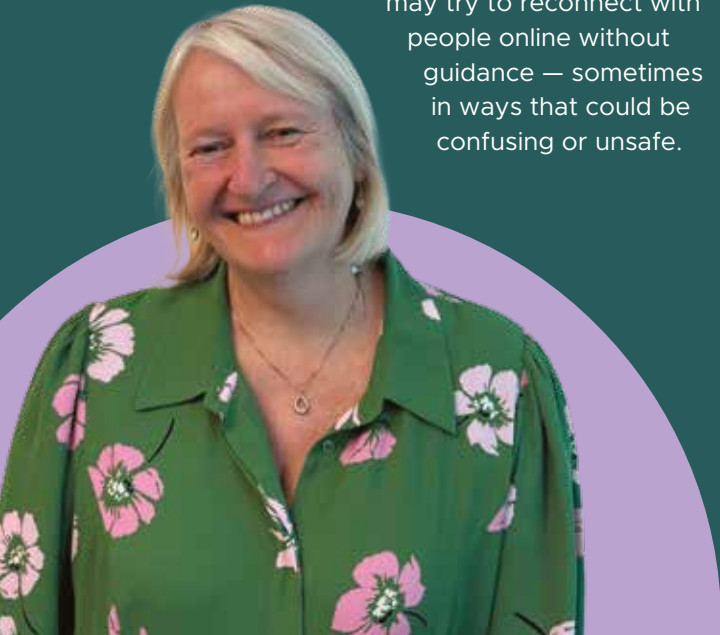
These standards encourage us to plan and support children in using digital tools in a safe and thoughtful way.

These standards are based on what children and young people need, not just now but throughout their lives. They reflect the ideas from the Children's Social Care Review and the Public Law Working Group, which both call for a more personal and flexible approach to contact. They also consider the impact of trauma and how we can support children in ways that help them feel safe and understood.

This document was developed with input from adopted people, birth families, adopters, professionals, and researchers. It encourages everyone involved in adoption to work together — to listen to children, to support adoptive parents, and to treat birth families with respect and care. They challenge us to move beyond outdated notions of contact as a risk to be managed and instead embrace it as a relationship to be nurtured — wherever it is safe and, in the child's best interests.

We hope these standards will help build a culture where adoption is open and honest, where children can understand their stories, and where relationships are valued and supported. A culture where children are supported to make sense of their stories, where adoptive parents are empowered to walk alongside them, and where birth families are treated with dignity and compassion. Every child deserves to feel connected, loved and understood as they grow and develop and have a fuller understanding of the reasons they were adopted, and these standards provide a framework to support this important area of practice.

Sarah Johal MBE

National Adoption Strategic Lead

Introduction

The National Practice Standards for Staying in Touch (SiT)/Contact have been developed as a call for action, to set the bar in terms of what adopted children need from the sector to minimise unnecessary loss and to enable them to maintain connections and relationships with the people who are important to them. Well-considered SiT/ contact plans are essential to ensuring important and meaningful connections can be safely supported and maintained.

These National Practice Standards provide a starting point as a set of expectations for children and family services and adoption agencies from the moment it becomes even a possibility that a child may be looked after, to them being placed for adoption and beyond. SiT/contact planning for a child needs to start well before a Placement Order (PO) is granted or consent to placing for adoption is obtained. If adoption is one of the options being considered for the child, SiT/contact planning must form a central element of that early work, identifying and promoting proactive engagement between birth families/significant others, temporary carers and adopters. SiT/contact planning is a continually evolving process rather than a single event. Practice needs to recognise this, engage with a child's changing needs, embrace new technology

and acknowledge that if professionals/adopters don't help children and young people manage their connections they may explore them alone on social media unaided, unsupported and potentially unsafely. We hope these standards provide a clear direction of travel for the sector to better help children maintain meaningful connections and relationships.

These National Practice Standards have been developed by Adoption England in consultation with: the Maintaining Relationships Core Group, Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Leaders, Local Authorities, Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA), experts by experience (adopted people, birth parents and adopters) and professionals across the sector. Professor Elsbeth Neil from the University of East Anglia has provided academic advice, drawing on her research studies in this field.

In producing these standards Adoption England acknowledges that some children and young people may already have been let down by a lack of proper attention to early staying in touch/contact planning. These standards cannot rectify past practice but can be used to provide clarity in regard to practice going forwards for all children and young people.

Key purpose

The purpose of these standards is to highlight the importance of maintaining connections and relationships in order to promote effective SiT/contact planning based on each child's individual needs.

Children and young people who have a coherent sense of their life story are more likely to have a positive sense of adoptive identity.

Experiences of good quality SiT/contact can promote children's identity and well-being, and where adoptive parents support children's birth family connections, this is positive for parent-child relationships in the adoptive family.

Safe and meaningful SiT/contact plans may also help to mitigate the enormous sense of loss adopted children/people can experience.

Fundamental values and assumptions that underpin the SiT/Contact standards.

"Our main recommendation is that there should be a tailormade approach to the issue of contact for each adopted child which includes and promotes face-to-face contact with important individuals in that child's life if it can be safely achieved and is in the child's best interests."
Public Law Working Group: adoption sub-group report. Recommendations for best practice in respect of adoption. Nov 2024 Para 42 Pg 24

1. The lifelong needs of the adopted child/person (whether adopted from care or relinquished) should be at the centre of decision-making.

2. All decision-making in regard to SiT/contact plans fully understands and takes into account the trauma the child has experienced and uses this lens to inform and shape the SiT/contact planning.

3. The child/young persons' wishes and feelings about SiT/contact should be sought and carefully considered initially and on an ongoing basis. Children should be given appropriate opportunities to exercise agency in relation to their SiT/contact plans and those who are pre verbal, disabled or neurodiverse supported to express their views in whatever ways are best for them.

4. SiT/contact plans should be individual and bespoke.

5. Consideration should be given to the whole range of possible SiT/contact methods with an underlying presumption that ongoing direct contact will be supported wherever that is in the child's best interests. If some relationships or connections are initially assessed as unsafe or unable to be maintained, practice is sensitive to the distinctions and differences between; those where the child may need long term protection and therefore it is unlikely for contact to ever be possible, and those where in the future it may be possible for the person to play a positive role in the child's life.

6. SiT/contact planning should be a process rather than a one-time event, regularly reviewed and flexible enough to meet the changing needs of the child and the evolving circumstances of the birth and adoptive family.

7. Robust support for all involved in SiT/contact arrangements should be available according to people's unique needs and recognises that people's needs are likely to change over time.

8. SiT/contact planning and support should pay attention to the relationships between everybody involved as these are key to the quality of SiT/contact. Practice supporting the development of positive relationships between the birth and adoptive family should be promoted.

9. The quality of SiT/contact, particularly in terms of the child's physical and emotional safety, and security of their relationships within the adoptive family should remain central.

10. All involved in adoption should recognise the adopted person's need (in childhood and throughout their life) for open, honest communication about adoption, support with SiT/contact and access to life story/background information.

11. After adoption LAs, RAAs and VAAs work in a spirit of partnership with adoptive parents.

Relevant statutory regulations and guidance

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The National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014 *https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-national-minimum-standards*

Adoption and Children Act 2002 (as amended by Children and Families Act 2014) *https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents*

Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 *https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/389/contents*

Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 *https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/691*

Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 *https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/959/contents*

Family Procedure Rules 2010 *https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/2955/contents*

The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 2 care planning placement and case review *https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-care-planning-placement-and-case-review*

Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2013 *https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-statutory-guidance-2013*

Working Together 2023 *https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2*

Public Law Working Group: adoption sub-group report Nov 2024 *https://www.judiciary.uk/guidance-and-resources/wholesale-reform-to-adoption-process-is-needed-says-public-law-working-group*

Implementation and governance

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The National Practice Standards for SiT/Contact are a framework to guide good practice and promote standardisation across all agencies. They purposely exclude identification of specific roles and responsibilities and/or timelines for completion of tasks and are not

practice guidance. The implementation and governance arrangements should be developed locally across regional partnerships to include roles, responsibilities, and timeframes. The standards will be reviewed to incorporate experience of their use and any emerging changes.

Abbreviations used in the standards (for definitions see glossary)

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PO – Placement Order

LA – Local Authority

RAA – Regional Adoption Agency/Regional Adoption Agency Alliance

VAA – Voluntary Adoption Agency

SiT – Staying in Touch

CAFCASS – Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service

IRO – Independent Reviewing Officer

FGC – Family Group Conference

FGD – Family Group Decision-Making

CPR – Child's Permanence Report

PAR – Prospective Adopters Report

EP – Early Permanence

National Practice Standards
for Staying in Touch/Contact

Standard 1

Principles underpinning effective Staying in Touch/contact (SiT) planning for children.

S1. ***All professionals, including practitioners, managers and leaders across all organisations take active responsibility to ensure inclusive and anti-discriminatory delivery of practice.***

1.1   The child's best interests and welfare throughout their life will be central to the SiT/contact planning process and maintaining connections decision-making at all times.

1.2   All staff work and adhere to the timescales and processes set out in regulations and guidance.

1.3   Agencies strive to engage a diverse workforce and promote an affirming, inclusive culture that encourages openness and acceptance of diversity.

1.4   All staff commit to anti-discriminatory practice, and receive up to date training in equality, diversity and inclusion issues, including current research evidence to increase knowledge, raise awareness and improve practice.

1.5   Knowledge and awareness of 'own' values and an understanding of the impacts of discrimination are embedded in practice by all.

1.6   Organisations work to create 'safe spaces' where staff are supported to discuss and continue to develop their knowledge and awareness of diversity and inclusion issues.

1.7   All individuals feel able to recognise and challenge discrimination, including micro aggressions, and to support those impacted.

1.8   All staff work in partnership to secure the best interests of the child in accordance with their roles and responsibilities, and multi-agency processes are clear and transparent.
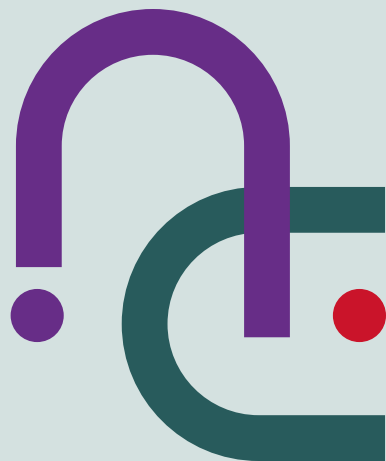
Standard 2

The importance of maintaining family and significant relationships for the child is recognised.

S2. Practitioners, managers and leaders actively enable the child to maintain significant relationships throughout their care journey and after adoption to support continuity, positive identity development and emotional wellbeing.

2.1 The value of maintaining significant relationships for the child's emotional wellbeing and identity development is acknowledged by all involved in care planning/delivery and given due recognition in working practices.

2.2 Sibling relationships (including 'sibling-like' relationships) are maintained and enabled (whenever safe and possible), appreciating both their value in childhood and potential for life-long supportive connections.

2.3 Plans to stay in touch with siblings should be determined by assessment of the children's needs and of the potential benefits and challenges, rather than just where the siblings are living or what contact siblings are having with other birth family members.

2.4 The child's voice is listened to and they are asked and supported (in appropriate ways that take into account age, disability, developmental level and neurodiversity) to think about who is important to them. Agencies consider the use of advocacy services for some children.

2.5 It is recognised that children may have important relationships with people who are not biological/birth relatives.

2.6 The central purpose of the SiT/contact plans (to benefit the child) is clearly communicated to adopters and birth family/significant others, throughout care planning/adoption by consent and after adoption. Everyone is supported to understand their roles and manage expectations.

2.7 Where direct SiT/contact needs to be facilitated by a professional, this work is undertaken by practitioners who have had appropriate training and who fully understand the need to support the relationships between the adults.

2.8 The traumatic experiences of children in care who are then adopted are actively considered when developing SiT/contact plans to ensure they are not further traumatised. SiT/contact plans should feel emotionally safe for children and multidisciplinary assessment is used where there are complex circumstances/trauma histories.

2.9 Practice recognises the lifelong needs of the adopted person, and that safe effective SiT/contact planning in childhood builds the foundations to address their future needs as adopted adults.

Standard 3

The engagement of family members/significant others important to the child.

S3. All services ensure that the child's family/significant others are identified early, and actively supported to engage with SiT/contact arrangements and planning throughout the care planning journey and after adoption.

3.1 The importance of a child's connections and relationships is acknowledged by all practitioners from the first possibility that the child may be cared for by the LA, including adoption by consent. Practitioners strive to establish early communication channels recognising without these it can be much more challenging to enable SiT/contact arrangements later on.

3.2 Family/significant others are identified and recorded early in the care planning process through Family Group Conferencing/Decision-Making (FGC/FGD) and the child's views on who is important to them are recorded.

3.3 Family/significant others are supported to understand the importance of life story work and its links with SiT/contact planning, and to engage with the processes of sharing information about themselves and the child in whatever ways they find easiest.

3.4 Practitioners communicate openly and respectfully with birth family/significant others, recognising the trauma associated with having a child removed from the family and the need to help build the relationships between the adults caring for the child and family/significant others.

3.5 The birth family is actively supported (emotionally and practically) to contribute to the child's life story materials and engage with SiT/contact planning from an early stage. Practitioners also recognise that grief and loss may prevent birth family from being able to fully engage, so communication channels are kept open.

3.6 Birth family are offered emotionally attuned independent support to help them understand how they can continue to be involved in their child's life from the point adoption is being considered. Practice recognises that multiple pro-active offers may be needed at different points in time to enable take up of this support.

3.7 Birth family/significant others are supported emotionally and practically to take part in regular reviews of the SiT/contact arrangements to ensure they still meet the needs of the child.

3.8 Practitioners continue to value relationships for the child and support ongoing SiT/contact during family finding, recognising that engagement with birth family/significant others during this time also supports the continuity of connection after adoption.

3.9 Birth parents/wider family are encouraged and supported to meet with their child's adoptive parents face-to-face, wherever safe and possible, and it is recognised that this does not have to happen immediately after a child moves in with their adoptive family, but when they feel able to. Situations where this does not happen are the exception and support for all parties in this process is crucial.

3.10 Independent practitioners are used to engage empathically with birth family/significant others around SiT/contact planning and information gathering when relationships with the LA inhibit this or have shut down.

Standard 4

Care planning processes and systems promote the importance of SiT/contact arrangements and maintaining connections for children.

S4. *When adoption becomes the preferred permanence option for the child all birth family members and significant others are considered for SiT/contact plans.*

4.1 LA processes (e.g. Family Group Conferencing/Decision-Making, systems, Important Relationships Eco-maps and recording practices) vigorously promote the identification, engagement and documentation of all those important to the child, not just adults that might be assessed as alternative carers.

4.2 EP placements are actively sought for all suitable children enabling early opportunities during proceedings to build positive carer/adopter and family/significant others relationships.

4.3 Practitioners recognise that all observations and recordings may have a potential relevance for future SiT/contact planning, and therefore seek to capture any indicators that the parent may be able to play a positive role in the child's life in the future even if unable to do so in the present.

4.4 The Child's Permanence Report (CPR) is comprehensively completed. All birth family members/significant others are identified for SiT/contact planning, the child's wishes and feelings are accurately captured and the relevant sections of the CPR are shared with the birth parents who are actively supported to contribute to this document. Practice recognises that in the future adoptees have a right to see the CPR so it is written with this in mind.

4.5 Practitioners from the LAs and RAAs start liaising as soon as adoption is being contemplated to ensure continuity of knowledge about the child and family/significant others and smooth transitions.

4.6 The full range of SiT/contact options are actively considered for each child (including face-to-face and digital) and the analysis/decision-making documented and communicated to all involved. The risks of not enabling communication with birth family/significant others are weighed alongside the risks of doing so.

4.7 The importance of enabling the child to enjoy and fully benefit from SiT/contact plans is recognised in all arrangements.

4.8 All SiT/contact plans are regularly reviewed and individually tailored to meet the needs of each child and their unique circumstances. Appropriate tools are used to help with planning.

4.9 All SiT/contact plans are flexible to ensure they meet the evolving needs of the child. Plans take into account up-to-date research evidence around developmental stages and trauma informed thinking and the potential for changes in the attitude/lives of others.

4.10 SiT/contact plans actively engage with the child's culture and heritage (including ethnicity, class, religion and language) promoting connections that can assist with a child's healthy identity development, whilst recognising that identity is also fluid and interactional.

Standard 5

Preparing and enabling adopters to fully engage with a child's SiT/contact plans

S5. *Adopters are recruited, trained and helped to understand their role in supporting a child's identity development and emotional wellbeing through SiT/contact arrangements.*

5.1 Adopters are supported to understand the benefits of promoting significant relationships for the child throughout the assessment and preparation training and after adoption.

5.2 The adoption agency's recruitment, assessment and preparation of adopters recognises that openness in adoption, positive attitudes to and the ability/capacity to promote and sustain SiT/contact arrangements are essential for the child's long-term welfare. How adopters will engage with this work is fully outlined in the Prospective Adopters Report (PAR).

5.3 Adopter training (during assessment and after adoption) involves adopted young people/adults, adopters and birth family/significant others with lived experience of participating in SiT/contact plans.

5.4 Adopters fully understand the objectives and purpose of the child's SiT/contact plan, the connections with life story work, and are robustly supported to actively participate in both.

5.5 Adopters understand that SiT/contact is a relational and dynamic process and the importance of investing in and building adult relationships with birth family/significant others to support the child.

5.6 Adopters are encouraged and supported to meet with birth family/significant others face-to-face wherever safe and possible. Situations where this does not happen are the exception and support for all parties in this process is crucial. Such meetings are not promoted as one-offs but as the beginning of a new relationship between the adults focused on the ongoing best interests of the child.

5.7 Adopters are given a safe space to discuss any fears or anxieties they have about SiT plans in addition to being actively involved in the SiT/contact planning process (risk/benefit assessment and analysis) and all subsequent decisions are documented and fully explained.

5.8 The emotional and logistical challenges for adopters of engaging with a child's SiT/contact arrangements are recognised by the relevant adoption agency and robust support services are available for all types of SiT/contact arrangements whether direct, indirect, digital or Letterbox. Regular SiT/contact check-ins are provided for on-going support.

5.9 Adopters fully understand that SiT/contact is not a one-off event but a life-long endeavour and are committed to this in the best interests of the child.

Standard 6

Children are matched with adopters who can fully support their identity needs and positively engage with their SiT/contact plans.

S6. ***The process of matching and family finding for the child recognises the importance of the child's needs to maintain connections with birth family and significant others throughout the life course.***

6.1 Every stage of family finding activity considers the child's life-long identity needs and SiT/contact plan, and these are clearly assessed and documented.

6.2 All family finding activity actively considers the need for adopters who can engage with the child's life story dynamically and promote safe and meaningful connections with birth family/significant others.

6.3 At matching a comprehensive support plan to help the adopters engage with the SiT/contact plan is agreed and resource identified.

6.4 Consideration is given to whether the adopters can fully promote and actively engage with the SiT/contact plans to support the child's culture and heritage (race, culture, religion and language) thereby assisting with a child's identity development.

6.5 The birth parents/wider family are recognised as the best source of information about the child's cultural heritage and ethnic identity (including religion, socio economic status and class) and are supported to share this information to inform matching.

6.6 When a child moves to their adoptive family the adopters and all practitioners work in partnership to continue to recognise the importance of maintaining connections/relationships with birth family/significant others, and balance this with the child's immediate transition/settling-in needs.

6.7 Children are matched with empathic adopters who understand that SiT/contact arrangements can be challenging, for them, the child and for birth families/significant others, but also have a commitment to making them work and supporting the child to understand why there may be communication difficulties.

Standard 7

Delivering an effective organisational strategy to help children placed for adoption to maintain connections with their birth family and significant others.

S7. ***Senior and operational leaders influence and drive culture change to enable adopted children to maintain connections to important relationships.***

7.1 Organisational leaders ensure all professionals in their services understand the importance of promoting and maintaining connections for a child's identity development and are appropriately trained to carry out their roles effectively.

7.2 Organisational leaders and managers show drive and commitment to enabling adopted children stay in touch in the best ways possible with significant people in their lives. They ensure systems are in place to achieve this effectively and consider appointing a lead person.

7.3 Organisational leaders ensure that relevant SiT data is collected (who with, direct/indirect, frequency, support needs, reviews etc.) and used to inform service development.

7.4 Organisational leaders ensure processes are in place for people with lived experience of adoption to contribute to service development and delivery around SiT/contact planning.

7.5 Leaders and managers across the organisation ensure that systems are in place to ensure data gathered about a child's family members and significant others is shared with their respective adoption agency and remains on the child's file to assist with life story work and SiT/contact planning.

7.6 Leaders promote a learning culture within their own organisations and partnerships. This culture should be committed to on-going improvement in practices and attitudes, enabling children to keep the connections and relationships that are important to them whilst in care and after adoption.

7.7 Leaders and managers ensure that SiT/contact training, protocols and practice guidance is available, enabling all practitioners to strive to achieve best practice.

7.8 Leaders contribute to informing and changing public perceptions of adoption promoting updated, informed messages about modern adoption in society in general contributing to the realistic expectation management of adopters. This includes a need for adopter openness to supporting children's identity needs in general as well as to maintaining connections with the child's birth family/ significant others.

7.9 All agencies to consider what the sufficient resource requirement is to fulfil the support needs of children and families in relation to maintaining connections throughout a child's life.

Glossary of terms as used in the standards

Adoption England has put thought into the terms it has used throughout this document but recognises that other language could also be used. The terms we have chosen are therefore not prescriptive or exclusive. We also recognise that language is not static and terminology in social work practice is constantly evolving and adapting. Many LAs/RAAs/VAAs are moving from the language of 'Contact' to that of 'Staying in Touch' or 'Meet-ups' for post adoption communication. We have chosen to use the terms SiT/contact throughout the standards as whilst welcoming this shift in language to SiT to better reflect the meaning and purpose of relationships, the term 'contact' is still a widely used and understood term. It is used in documents and on websites and is referred to in statutory guidance and legislation so we cannot yet entirely move away from this terminology. Best practice is to check with families and individuals about the terms/language they understand and prefer to use.

Adoption – Adoption is a legal procedure that transfers all the parent's responsibilities to the adoptive parents. The adopted child becomes a new member of the adoptive family, and they receive the same rights as if they were born into that family. The birth parents of the child lose all rights or responsibilities for the child.

Adoption Order (AO) – This is the final court order which gives approved adopters full and permanent parental responsibility for a child. An adoption order can only be made with the consent of the birth parents or if the court has dispensed with the birth parents' consent. The order is issued by the Family Court, on the application from the prospective adopter/s. The adopter/s will then be provided with an adoption certificate bearing the child's new surname (if changed) which becomes the child's formal identifying document.

Adopted Adults – Adopted adults are adults who were adopted when they were a child.

Best Interests of the Child – To do something in a child's best interests usually refers to deciding according to what will most benefit the child's general wellbeing. The guiding principle of the Children Act 1989 is that the child's best interests are of paramount importance in all decisions made.

Birth Family – The biological family, a child was born into including birth parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins. Other terms include first family.

Birth Parents – A child's biological parents, to whom they were born. Other terms used include first parents.

Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) – Cafcass advises the family courts about the welfare of children and what is in their best interests.

Care – When a child is 'in care' this refers to when a child is under the care of the LA either through the consent of parents or by an order of the courts. If via and order of the courts the LA takes on the responsibility for the child as if they were the parent.

Child Permanence Report (CPR) – This is an important document and is completed by a child's social worker and has detailed information about the child's life experiences, birth family, health and the circumstances that led to the child being in care. It provides essential information about the child's background and heritage which is used in the matching process. It helps prospective adopters decide whether they feel they can meet the needs of a child.

Adopted adults can also request a copy of their CPR, and it contains important information about their life history.

Contact – Contact is the word many have used in the past; we are supportive of a change in language to acknowledge the relational importance of keeping connected with significant people. Other relational terms may include staying in touch (SiT) supporting connections or keeping in touch. Relationships between a child and their birth family (plus others who have been important in their lives) must always be considered when a child is adopted. The child's needs are central to any plan which must also take account of the views of all those detailed within the plan. Staying in touch (SiT) may be direct (face to face) or indirect (through letterbox / information exchanges) – see below for list of possibilities. Direct contact will often take place between an adopted child and their siblings, who may be living in other adoptive or foster families. An initial face to face meeting or meetings between adopters and birth parents or relatives is expected to take place, unless there are reasons this is not safe to do so, with consideration given to the best way to stay in touch. Individualised arrangements combined with life story work and diverse information sharing methods, help children in navigating loss/separation, understanding why they were in care, promotes stability in adoptive placements, facilitates the integration of their past and present to develop a coherent identity and is a potential resource in a child's developmental recovery.

SiT/contact Plan /Arrangements – A detailed proposal for maintaining a child's relationships and connections. A strategy laying out in advance what should happen in order to meet certain objectives in accordance with the child's SiT/contact needs.

Early Permanence (EP) – An Early Permanence Placement (EPP) refers to the situation where children are placed with foster carers who are also approved to adopt them if that becomes the plan. EPP is also referred to as concurrent planning and fostering for adoption.

Family Finding – Family finding refers to the activity after the courts have granted a Placement order whereby the LA/RAA searches for a suitable adoptive family for the child to live with.

Family Group Conference (FGC) – A family group conference is a family-led decision-making process in which the family and friends network come together to make a plan for a child.

Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) – The new Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (currently going through parliament Jan 2025) would add a new section to the Children Act 1989 to impose a duty on local authorities who are considering making a court application for a care or supervision order, to offer a family group decision making (FGDM) meeting to the child's parents or any person with parental responsibility for the child.

The purpose of the FGDM meeting is to enable a child's family network to meet to discuss the welfare needs of the child and to make a proposal in response to concerns about the child's welfare. The duty does not apply if the local authority determines that it would not be in the child's best interests.

Identity – This word can be used in different ways in different contexts. Here we use it to refer to a person's sense of self, meaning how they view themselves including their values, beliefs, heritage and purpose in life and how they perceive the world views them. Identity is always evolving and includes a person's inner and outer self but adolescence is seen as a developmental phase where identity development is intense and acceptance of self can also be impacted (positively or negatively) by the context in which understanding develops, hence the importance of a climate of adoption openness.

Adopted children and young people need the support of their adoptive parents in helping them develop a coherent sense of self. This is because separation, loss, and traumatic events that can lead to confusion and uncertainty that impact on a child's mental health and well-being. Adopted children also face challenges managing their status as an adopted person, due to stigma they may experience from others. Children who live securely with their parents from birth have their understanding of their life story and identity supported by their family members, who help carry their memories and histories throughout childhood. Adopted children do not have this so a child needs adopters to talk to them about their life story and actively value important relationships and connections by supporting safe and meaningful SiT/contact plans.

'Adoptive Identity' addresses these questions:

"Who am I as an adopted person?"

"What does being adopted mean to me?"

"How does this fit into my understanding of myself, relationships, family, and culture?"[1]

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) – the IRO is a social worker who is responsible for ensuring that care plans are legally compliant, meet the child's needs, take into account the child's wishes and feelings and are in the child's best interests.

Letterbox – Letterbox is a name for a specific method of SiT/contact and is a confidential arrangement for birth parents, relatives, and adoptive parents to exchange information about a child. It's usually a voluntary agreement where the parties exchange letters once or twice a year.

Life Story Work (LSW) – Adopted children are helped by their adoptive parents or their social workers/therapists to understand their personal history and develop their sense of identity, through an ongoing process of life story work. This includes supporting the child to understand who they are, their birth family, why they were taken into care and their early life

experiences, and how they came to be adopted. The main aim of LSW is to help the child understand what has happened to them, who they are and where they came from – building a healthy sense of identity.

Matching – Matching is the process of finding a suitable adoptive family for a specific child (see also family finding). Once a suitable family has been identified this will then proceed to an adoption matching panel for consideration.

Meaningful: Of significance, purpose or value to the child, to help the child achieve objectives such as: cope with grief and loss, develop a healthy sense of identity, make sense of their life. Meaningful can also include loving bonds between children and family members/significant others. Different relationships can be meaningful in different ways e.g. a much-loved sibling – now separated, and a grandparent who a child doesn't really know, but who can support them by passing on family history, can both be 'meaningful' connections.

Openness in Adoption – There are 2 types of adoptive openness: communicative openness, and structural openness. Communicative openness refers to a general spirit or attitude in which adoptive parents think and talk about adoption openly with their children, accepting their dual connections. Structural openness refers to the levels of communication/contact between adoptive and birth families. The two are often linked as adopters who exhibit communicative openness and are comfortable talking with the child about their life story and identity are also likely to engage with and promote contact and communication with the birth family.

Placement Order (PO) – This court order may be made by a family court at the end of care proceedings and gives permission for the local authority to formally place a child for adoption. If a child, subject to a placement order, moves in with a prospective adopter the local authority and the prospective adopter share parental responsibility for the child. A placement order ends when an adoption order is made.

Proceedings – Refers to the legal court process that begins when a local authority's children's services department applies for a care or supervision order for a child. The local authority may initiate care proceedings if they believe a child is at risk of significant harm, or if they need to intervene with the child's care.

Prospective Adopter Report (PAR): This is the report written by a social worker which summarises the information collected during the adoption assessment process regarding prospective adopters. The PAR is presented to the Adoption Panel, and once adopters are approved, the PAR is also used to provide information to social workers, seeking adoptive parents for children. The report contains information and evidence about why the social worker considers the prospective adopter suitable to be approved as an adopter. Prospective adopters have the opportunity to read the report, add their own comments and clarify any inaccuracies.

Review – Reassessing the child's needs in relation to maintaining connections, how this is done (method) and the frequency.

Relinquished – Relinquished is a term that refers to those babies/children where a parent or parents request that their child be placed for adoption (adoption with consent). If a baby/child is relinquished there is no court involvement in seeking a Placement Order.

Safe – When we use the term 'safe' to describe staying in touch, we are referring to a balanced decision about the quality of contact that ensures that children are physically safe and that they feel emotionally safe with SiT plans. It is not realistic to aim for contact plans that are always stress free, but the level of emotional challenge should manageable for the child, and should be balanced against long term potential benefits. The risks of children not staying in touch also need to be balanced. For example, the risks that unmet needs will lead to young people seeking contact that is unsafe and unsupported contact with birth relatives,

or the risks related to the loss of the birth relative in the child's life.

Significant Others – An umbrella term used to cover anyone who might be important to a child including (but not exclusively): foster carers, foster carers children, other children in care placed with the same foster carers, siblings, half siblings, step-siblings, friends, neighbours etc.

SiT/KiT – See **Contact**.

Special Guardianship Order (SGO) – This is a court order, introduced in 2005. It provides for parental responsibility to be shared between the child's parents and an individual or individuals other than the birth parents. This could be a grandparent, close relative, foster carer or other connected person. The difference between Special Guardianship and adoption is that the birth parents remain the legal parents, and as such share parental responsibility for the child; however, their ability to exercise this responsibility is strictly limited and the Special Guardian is able to make nearly all the decisions in a child's life without requiring the parent's consent. Children on a SGO are no longer 'in care'. The order expires on a child's 18th birthday.

Timely – In step with the child's needs, developmental phases, in response to significant birth family events.

Trauma Informed – Trauma-informed practice is an approach to health and care interventions which is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development.

Footnotes
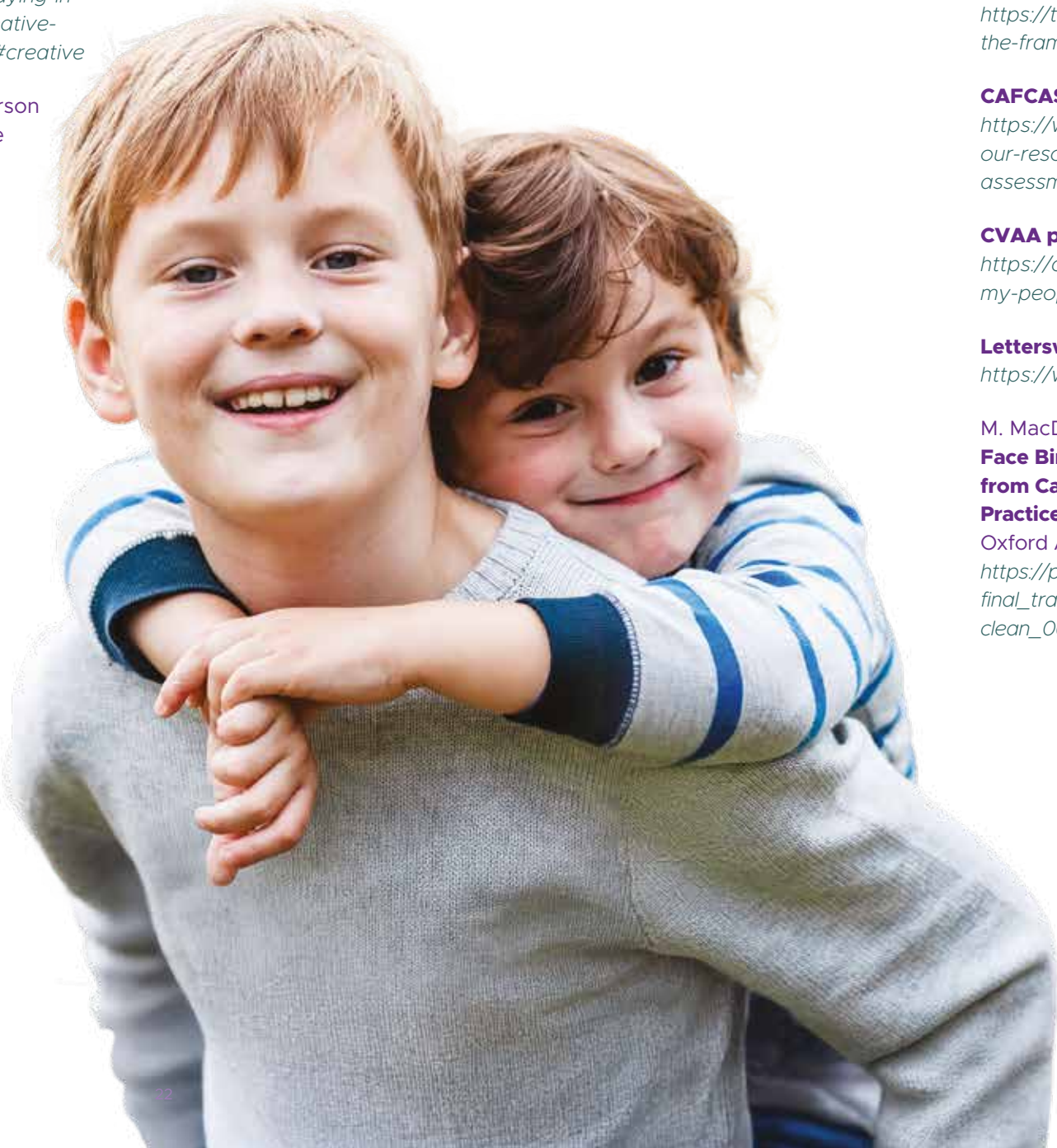• •

1   Handbook of Identity Theory and Research, edited by Seth J. Schwartz, et al., Springer New York, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central,

Types of SiT/contact methods to be considered

There are multiple ways people can stay in touch after adoption, and a variety of labels such as 'sharing updates', 'post-box exchanges' or 'digital communication', and 'meet-ups' are often used to describe the different types of interactions that can take place. Further helpful creative ideas and resources can be found on the research in Practice website: *https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/open-access-resources/staying-in-touch-contact-after-adoption/creative-ways-of-thinking-about-contact/#creative*

- Supervised face-to-face/in-person meetings – these meetings are mediated and sometimes referred to as 'meet-ups'.

- Unsupervised face-to-face/in-person meetings between the birth family and the child and adopters– these meeting can also be called 'meet-ups.'

- Facilitated one-way letters (adopters to birth parents facilitated by the agency).

- Mediated two-way letter exchanges (often called Letterbox).

- Unmonitored and informal exchanges (e.g. direct email/messages/texts directly between families).

- Mediated and confidential digital exchanges – the exchange of letters, messages, texts, audio or visual material via specific platforms like Letterswap.[2]

- Informal direct digital communication – where families communicate directly via email, messaging apps etc.

Footnotes

2   *https://www.letterswap.co.uk*

Resources and Links

Research in Practice
https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/open-access-resources/staying-in-touch-contact-after-adoption

UEA longitudinal contact after adoption study (funded by Nuffield Foundation)
https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/contact-after-adoption

AFDiT
https://transracialadoptionframework.uk/the-framework

CAFCASS Principles & Templates
https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/professionals/our-resources-professionals/child-impact-assessment-framework-ciaf

CVAA paper: My People
https://cvaa.org.uk/cvaa-launches-my-people

Letterswap
https://www.letterswap.co.uk

M. MacDonald 2021. **Supporting Face-to-Face Birth Family Contact after Adoption from Care: Learning for Trauma-Sensitive Practice** | The British Journal of Social Work | Oxford Academic.
https://pure.qub.ac.uk/files/216628165/BJSW_final_trauma_sensitive_contact_support_clean_060720.pdf

PLWG Report
https://www.judiciary.uk/guidance-and-resources/public-law-working-group-interim-report-recommendations-for-best-practice-in-respect-of-adoption

Safe and Meaningful Contact Guidelines (SaMC)
https://training.psychologicalminds.com/courses/SaMC-guidelines

SWET Templates
https://www.adcs.org.uk/swet

'Supporting direct contact' and 'Helping birth families' studies
http://www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html

Family Law Articles:
https://www.familylaw.co.uk/news_and_comment/rethinking-adoption-and-birth-family-contact-is-there-a-role-for-the-law

https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/95623/1/Maintaining_children_s_birth_family_relationships_in_adoption_A_theory_of_change.pdf

Adoption England

regional adoption agencies working together