



# Meet Before Match (MBM) Practice, Principles and Guidance

# Table of content

## Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	3
Purpose .....	3
<b>Introduction and Terminology</b> .....	3
<b>What MBM Is and Is Not</b> .....	4
Meet Before Match (MBM) is: .....	4
Meet Before Match (MBM) is not: .....	4
<b>Appropriate use of MBM</b> .....	5
<b>Overarching Principles Underpinning MBM</b> .....	6
<b>Meet Before Match vs Transitions</b> .....	7
<b>Evidence-Informed Context</b> .....	8
<b>Practice Guidance for Effective MBM</b> .....	9
<b>Closing statement</b> .....	11
<b>Appendix: MBM Practice checklist</b> .....	13

## Executive Summary

This guidance establishes a national framework for the consistent, safe, and child-centred use of Meet Before Match (MBM) across England. MBM refers to structured, purposeful meetings between a child and prospective adopters prior to formal matching decisions. While not a statutory requirement, MBM can strengthen matching analysis, support relational understanding, and enhance permanence planning when used proportionately and with clear purpose.

The guidance clarifies appropriate use, reinforces the distinction between MBM and transitions planning after the agency decision has been agreed for the match, and sets expectations regarding preparation, recording, emotional safety, and professional boundaries. It promotes greater consistency across agencies while maintaining flexibility for individual circumstances. Underpinning the framework is a commitment to trauma-responsive practice, robust decision-making, and the recognition that each child's journey to permanence is unique.

## Purpose

Meet Before Match (MBM) is a planned, purposeful meeting between a child (or children) and prospective adopter(s) prior to a formal match being presented to the Adoption Panel or considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

Where meetings are described as "sightings" or informal encounters, these must still sit within the principles set out in this guidance. There must be a clear, recorded rationale for such meetings, and the expectation is that the child is aware of, and appropriately prepared for, any meeting taking place. Unplanned or covert encounters are not consistent with child-centred, trauma-responsive practice.

This guidance sets out how MBM should be conducted to ensure it is consistent, safe, child-focused, and meaningful for children, adopters, and practitioners. It outlines principles, and practical guidance for improving practice across agencies.

## Introduction and Terminology

- MBM is a structured, exploratory approach designed to support informed decision-making and strengthen permanence planning.
- It is not a statutory requirement rather should be used where it clearly adds value.
- Across regions, terms such as "*bump into meetings*," "*chemistry meetings*," and "*pre-meets*" are often used. For clarity and consistency, Meet Before Match (MBM) is the preferred term as agreed by a range of stakeholders across England.

- MBM must not pre-empt panel or ADM decisions and should not be used as a substitute for Transitions planning, as described in the University of East Anglia's *Moving to Adoption* model.

## What MBM Is and Is Not

### Meet Before Match (MBM) is:

- An opportunity to explore potential matches in a child-centred and safe way.
- A chance for prospective adopters to see the child's true personality, behaviours, and interaction with their current carers in a natural environment as opposed to information contained within a report. There are noted benefits of this as evidenced from feedback from adopters who have attended national and pan regional events.

This is further supported by research undertaken at Cardiff University, including studies led by Dr Blakemore examining Meet Before Match experiences. The research highlights the importance of early relational encounters in the transition from foster care to adoption. Findings indicate that structured opportunities for prospective adopters to meet children prior to matching support rapport-building, enhance understanding of the child's needs within context, and enable collaborative planning with foster carers and professionals. These processes were identified as contributing to reduced uncertainty, more trauma-sensitive transitions, and greater stability.

- Enabling prospective adopters to gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of the child beyond written descriptions, through direct experience of their individuality and day-to-day presentation
- An opportunity to inform professional assessment and adopters' understanding of the suitability of the proposed match.
- A way of improving efficiency. These meetings provide additional observational evidence for the matching panel, aiding in faster, more confident, and accurate decision-making.

### Meet Before Match (MBM) is not:

- A statutory requirement or routine procedural step
- A "chemistry test". Matching decisions must not be based on subjective impressions or first encounters. Adoption matching is grounded in assessed capacity, understanding of need, long-term parenting capability, and the ability to meet the child's needs. MBM should inform professional analysis, not replace it with intuition or informal judgement.

- A trial arrangement or assessment of the child. Children must never experience uncertainty, repeated meetings, or emotional testing
- A substitute for robust matching analysis. Formal assessment, reports, and professional judgement remain essential.
- Introductions: MBM is distinct from the formal introductions process that takes place after a match has been approved by the Agency Decision Maker.
- A meeting used to bridge the period between a match being identified and attendance at Matching Panel, or between a Matching Panel recommendation and the ADM's formal decision.

## Appropriate use of MBM

MBM should only occur where there is a clear, documented purpose and is in the child's best interests.

### Situations Where MBM May Be Considered:

- Complexity in the proposed match (e.g., trauma, therapeutic needs, developmental uncertainty)
- Gaps in information that cannot be resolved through reports alone
- Older children or sibling groups where relational dynamics are significant
- Prospective adopters require additional experiential understanding
- The child may benefit in relation to life story work or relational understanding
- All participants can be appropriately prepared to ensure emotional safety

### Situations Where MBM Should Not Be Used:

- No defined purpose or gap in information
- Creates unnecessary delay in achieving permanence
- Poses a risk of anxiety, confusion, or emotional harm to the child
- To fill the period after panel recommendation and prior to the ADM decision

### Decision-Making and Recording:

- A social work representative for all those involved should coordinate planning, communication, and oversight
- All MBMs must be recorded on the child's and adopter's file, including those that do not result in a match

- It is recommended that agencies collect and monitor data on MBM frequency, purpose, and outcomes to support quality assurance
- Emotional impact on all participants must be considered and planned for.

## Overarching Principles Underpinning MBM

1. **Child's Welfare is Paramount:** MBM must always prioritise the child's best interests.
2. **Purposeful and Proportionate Use:** MBM is only appropriate when it adds value; it cannot replace Transitions planning.
3. **Timing and Boundaries:** MBM occurs before match submission and must not fill panel-to-ADM gaps.
4. **Preparation for All Involved:** Children, adopters, foster carers, and professionals must be prepared and supported.
5. **Informed and Transparent Decision-Making:** Roles, expectations, and intended outcomes should be clearly communicated and recorded.
6. **Trauma-Informed and Attachment-Aware Practice:** MBM must be sensitive to emotional impact and avoid deficit-based narratives.
7. **Respect for the Child's Identity:** Children's views, heritage, and relational history must be central.
8. **Adopter Terminology:** Adopted adults' role and identity must be communicated to the child in a sensitive and consistent way.
9. **Consistency Across Agencies:** Where more than one agency is involved, there should be a shared understanding and agreement about the purpose, timing, planning, and conduct of MBM, so that all parties are working to the same expectations and the child experiences a coherent and consistent approach.
10. **Equity, Inclusion, and Non-Discrimination:** Decisions to be free from bias.
11. **Professional Accountability and Recording:** Decisions, rationales, and outcomes to be clearly documented.
12. **Planned Number of Meetings:** The number of MBM meetings should be **agreed in advance**; if more than two meetings are required, the rationale must be clearly recorded to ensure purposeful and proportionate use.

## Meet Before Match vs Transitions

An illustrative snapshot of the differences between the two.

Aspect	Meet Before Match (MBM)	Transitions (Moving to Adoption UEA)
<b>Purpose</b>	Explore Potential matches before panel/ ADM decisions	Plan/manage child's move to other arrangements.
<b>Timing</b>	Before match submission	After ADM ratification of match approval
<b>Number of Meetings</b>	Usually no more than 2 occasions	Usually, a minimum of 7 consecutive days
<b>Role</b>	Informative; supports understanding and analysis	Operational; ensures safety and attachment continuity
<b>Boundaries</b>	Must not fill gaps between panel and ADM or used as transitions	Meetings held as MBM are not to replace transitions
<b>Focus</b>	Relational understanding, child presentation, Adopters readiness	Emotional support, Practical introductions, safeguarding relationships
<b>Key message:</b> MBM is <i>pre-decision and exploratory</i> ; Transitions is <i>post-decision and operational</i> . Both are essential, distinct, and complementary.		

## Evidence-Informed Context

This guidance is informed by practice learning and emerging UK research, including work undertaken for the Wales Adoption Service (Blakemore, The Role of Pre-meets in the Formation of Families Through Adoption). While this study is relatively small in scale, and the wider evidence base in this area remains limited, it offers useful insights into practice where there is currently little formal research available.

Although terminology differs across nations, the findings highlight important relational, emotional, and systemic considerations that are directly relevant to Meet Before Match practice in England.

Research and practice learning indicate that well-planned early meetings can:

- Bring the child “to life” beyond written reports, enabling prospective adopters to understand the child’s individual characteristics, personality, and relational style.
- Provide a safe opportunity to explore relational dynamics and reflect on emotional responses before formal introductions begin.
- Reduce anxiety for prospective adopters and provide reassurance or, where necessary, an opportunity to withdraw prior to formal matching decisions.
- Support adopters to begin adjusting psychologically to their parenting role and imagine the child within their family.
- Lay early foundations for relational permanence where emotional connection begins to emerge.
- Create space for foster carers to begin building trust with prospective adopters, process anticipated loss, and share valuable insight about the child’s responses.

The research also highlights the importance of careful preparation, emotional support, consistency, and clarity of purpose, reinforcing the principles set out in this national guidance.

## Practice Guidance for Effective MBM

### Clarifying Purpose and Consistency

- MBM need to have a specific, child-centred purpose clearly communicated across agencies.
- Agencies need to consider implementing a *consistent framework* for MBM while retaining flexibility for individual needs.
- High-quality MBM plans include clear objectives, safe settings, prepared participants, and explicit outcomes that inform matching decisions and life story work.
- Where appropriate, an expectation-setting meeting involving professionals, foster carers, and prospective adopters should take place prior to MBM to clarify purpose, roles, boundaries, and intended outcomes.
- MBM are not to be used to bridge the period between identification of a proposed match and presentation to Matching Panel, or between a Matching Panel recommendation and the ADM's formal decision.
- MBM is distinct from Transitions planning and must not substitute the structured introductions process described within the University of East Anglia's *Moving to Adoption* model.

### Preparation and Planning

- Children, adopters, foster carers, and professionals must be prepared for MBM to ensure emotional safety and meaningful engagement.
- Children must be aware of and appropriately prepared for any MBM meeting. Preparation should be age-appropriate, trauma-informed, and may draw on approaches used when preparing children for Adoption Activity Days where helpful.
- Adopters should be supported to anticipate relational dynamics manage feelings of uncertainty or scrutiny, and understand the child's needs. MBM can provide space to relieve anxieties, reflect on emotional responses, and begin to imagine the child within their family.
- Foster carers should be fully briefed and supported. MBM may provide an opportunity for foster carers to begin building trust with prospective adopters and to start processing feelings associated with the child's transition, including anticipated loss and grief.
- The timing and duration of the MBM should be agreed in advance and adhered to as far as possible. Extended meetings should be avoided, even if interactions are

going positively, to ensure the child's emotional and physical needs remain central throughout. Any deviation from the planned timeframe should be carefully considered, managed, and documented with rationale.

- Where prospective adopters have other children, whether birth or previously adopted, a clear decision must be made in advance about their involvement in the MBM. The rationale for including or excluding them should be recorded, considering both the child's and the family's needs, and ensuring the focus remains on the child subject to the MBM.
- A named professional coordinates planning, communication, and oversight.

### Collaboration and Communication

- RAAs, VAAs, and fostering teams should collaborate proactively, with clear roles and responsibilities.
- Connections and communication between adoption teams and fostering teams should be strengthened to support consistent and informed practice.
- Foster carers' knowledge and insights must be actively incorporated, including their observations of the child's responses during MBM to inform matching analysis.
- Barriers to timely communication should be actively addressed by establishing clear points of contact, agreed timescales for sharing information, and prompt responses between agencies, so that planning and decision-making are not delayed.

### Timing, Structure, and Setting

- MBM should occur when sufficient information is available to inform matching decisions.
- The number of meetings should be proportionate and agreed in advance; rationale must be documented if more than two meetings are required.
- Settings should be safe, naturalistic, and child-friendly. Venues such as adopters' homes or environments that may create pressure, unrealistic expectations, or safeguarding concerns (e.g. swimming pools) would not be appropriate.
- Consideration should also be given to whether the foster carer's home is an appropriate setting. While it may be a familiar and secure environment for the child, it is also their primary safe space. The potential emotional impact and any blurring of boundaries should be carefully assessed, and the rationale for using (or not using) the foster home should be clearly recorded, ensuring the child's sense of safety and wellbeing remains central.

- Attendance should balance support for the child with professional observation needs.
- At no point should the child be left in the sole care of adopters during a MBM meeting.
- A professional should ideally be present to observe the MBM meeting.
- MBM should create opportunities to understand the child beyond written reports bringing the child “to life” through observation of individual characteristics, relational style, and interaction.

### Emotional Support and Reflection

- Support must be available before, during, and after MBM for children, adopters, and foster carers.
- Structured reflection should be built in to review learning and consider whether the intended purpose has been achieved.
- Adopters should feel safe to express questions or doubts or uncertainties without judgment. MBM may offer a space to build confidence in a proposed match, or to identify concerns at an early stage prior to formal matching and/or introductions.
- Foster carers should be offered space to reflect on their experiences and emotional responses, and to raise any concerns about the proposed match.
- Consideration should be given to the preparation and support needs of other children within both foster and adoptive families.

### Embedding Change and Learning

- Agencies need to identify and implement changes that will have the greatest impact on outcomes.
- A more standardised approach to MBM across England is required to reduce regional disparities and promote equitable experiences for children and families.
- Effective MBM examples are to be captured, documented, and shared across regions.
- Training, guidance, and policy development needs to support sustainable improvement.

### Closing statement

This guidance sets out a national framework to support greater clarity, consistency, and quality in *Meet Before Match* practice across England. It is intended to provide social workers, adoption practitioners, and agencies with a shared reference point to promote

safe, purposeful, and child-centred decision-making. However, it is recognised that every child's journey to permanence is unique. Meet Before Match planning must always be informed by the individual child's history, needs, identity, relationships, and timescales. Professional judgement remains central. This guidance should therefore be used as a framework to support consistent and reflective practice, while allowing flexibility to respond to the specific circumstances of each child and family.

## Appendix: Meet Before Match Practice checklist

This checklist can be used as a live practice tool to support planning, reflection, and recording at each stage of the Meet Before Match process. It can be revisited in supervision, matching discussions, and managerial oversight to ensure MBM remains child-centred, purposeful, proportionate, and clearly distinct from panel, ADM, and Transitions processes.

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### Stage 1: Consideration – Should MBM be held?

- Is there a clearly defined, child-centred purpose for MBM?
- Does MBM add value beyond written reports and professional discussion?
- Is the child likely to benefit (e.g. Adoption understanding and preparation life story understanding, relational insight)?
- Are there complexities in the proposed match that would benefit from relational exploration?
- Is this proportionate and unlikely to delay permanence?
- Is MBM being considered for the right reason (not to fill panel–ADM gap)?
- Is this distinct from Transitions planning (UEA Moving to Adoption model)?

#### Decision:

- Proceed with MBM (record rationale)
- Do not proceed (record rationale)

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### Stage 2: Planning and Preparation

#### Purpose and Rationale

(where age/developmentally appropriate and shared with all participants)

- Purpose clearly articulated and recorded
- Intended outcomes identified
- Risks considered and mitigated
- Child's views sought

#### Number of Meetings

- Number of MBM meetings agreed in advance
- Rationale documented
- If more than two meetings planned, clear justification recorded

## **Coordination**

- Named lead professional identified
- Roles and responsibilities agreed across agencies (LA/RAA/VAA/fostering)
- Communication plan established

## **Preparation of Participants**

- Child prepared in age-appropriate way
  - Terminology agreed (how adopters will be introduced)
  - Adopters prepared for emotional dynamics
  - Foster carers briefed and supported
  - Supervising Social worker included in planning
  - Professionals clear on observation focus
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## **Stage 3: Practical Arrangements**

- Timing appropriate within family finding process
  - Does not pre-empt panel or ADM decision
  - Child-friendly, safe, and neutral setting identified, rationale recorded?
  - Attendees agreed (child's SW, foster carer, family finder, others as appropriate)
  - Contingency plan in place if child becomes distressed
  - Duration proportionate to child's age and needs
  - Clarity on maintaining the timeframe agreed of meeting.
  - Who will agree if meeting time can be extended
- 

## **Stage 4: During the MBM**

- Child's emotional safety prioritised
  - Interaction remains natural and not overly assessed
  - Professionals observe without creating pressure
  - Foster carer's support role clear
  - Language used is consistent and sensitive
  - No assumptions made about outcome
  - Duration of meeting needs to be maintained (by professionals/foster carer)
- 

## **Stage 5: Immediate Reflection and Support**

- Child debriefed in age-appropriate way
  - Foster carer offered space to reflect
  - Adopters provided structured reflection opportunity
  - Emotional impact assessed for all participants
  - Any emerging concerns addressed promptly
-

### **Stage 6: Professional Review and Decision-Making**

- Clear analysis of what was learned
  - Consideration of whether original purpose was met
  - Foster carer insights incorporated
  - Child's response considered alongside wider matching evidence
  - Review of Matching Meeting held, or professional discussion held
  
  - Outcome recorded clearly on child's file
  - If not progressing to match, rationale documented
  - Learning captured for quality assurance
- 

### **Stage 7: Recording and Data**

- MBM recorded on child's and adopters record (including non-matches)
  - Purpose, participants, number of meetings, and outcomes logged
  - Data captured for agency monitoring (frequency, outcomes, patterns)
  - Any practice learning shared within team/region
- 

### **Final Practice Check**

Before concluding the process, ask:

- Was this MBM child-centred, purposeful, and proportionate?
- Did it support informed decision-making?
- Did it maintain clear boundaries between MBM and Transitions?
- Were panel/ADM processes respected?
- Would this process withstand reflective scrutiny?