



Guidance Introduction to voluntary adoption agencies

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This guide defines what a voluntary adoption agency is and what you must do if you intend to open one.

This guide is specific to voluntary adoption agencies and provides information that only applies to them. However, you must also read our main guide to registration, which applies to all children's social care services.

About voluntary adoption agencies

Adoption is a way of providing a new family for children who cannot be brought up by their own parents. It is a legal procedure in which all the parental responsibility is transferred to the adopters. Voluntary adoption agencies provide adoption services to children, adopters and others involved in adoption. They must operate on a not-for-profit basis.

An adoption agency can:

- recruit, assess, prepare and approve adopters
- make adoption placements for children and match them with adopters who can best meet their assessed needs
- support children in adoptive placements
- provide support and help to adoptive parents to enable them to provide a stable and permanent home for children placed with them for adoption and when they are formally adopted
- provide support to birth parents and birth families

We do not register individual adopters. Instead, we register adoption organisations that approve adopters.

You can [find more about adoption and the laws that apply to it](#).

About registration

Voluntary adoption agencies must register with Ofsted. It is an offence to run a voluntary adoption agency without registration. This helps to prevent unsuitable people from operating, managing or working within adoption services.

If you want to register, you must meet [all the relevant regulations](#) and the [national minimum standards](#) for adoption services.

You must also follow the [statutory guidance on adoption](#). Our [guide to registration for children's social care services](#) sets out the process of registration.

Providing services in England and Wales

If you intend to provide services in both England and Wales, you may also need to register with [Care Inspectorate Wales \(CIW\)](#), regardless of where the office or branches are located. You may need to follow the regulatory framework under both the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 (RISCA) and the Care Standards Act 2000.

Find out [how Ofsted works with CIW](#).

Registering branches of agencies

Voluntary adoption agencies have a principal office. They may have separate branches; these form part of the same registration and are listed on the same certificate.

Before you apply

For your voluntary adoption agency, you will need:

- to appoint a manager
- a statement of purpose that sets out the overall aims and objectives for the children's home

If you are an organisation, such as a company, you will also need to appoint a person known as a 'responsible individual' who represents the organisation to Ofsted. You do not need to appoint a responsible individual if you are a sole trader or partnership.

You need to identify your principal office and each of your branches that you want to register (if applicable). 'Principal office' means the place where you carry out some or all of the organisation's main functions. A 'branch' means any other premises.

You should identify whether you plan to carry out fostering for adoption services. If so, you must also register as an independent fostering agency.

What to provide when you apply

You must submit an [SC1 application](#) for the principal office. As part of this, you must include:

- SC1 forms for any branches, if applicable
- your details as the registered provider and, if you are an organisation such as a company, the responsible individual
- details of managers for the principal office and each branch, if applicable
- your statement of purpose
- your safeguarding policy
- your complaints procedure
- your equalities policy
- a copy of a certificate of insurance or written confirmation that insurance will be provided (for example, a letter of intention and an insurance quote)
- your children's guide
- a copy of planning permission granted, a certificate of lawfulness, a copy of a planning application or evidence that planning permission is not required
- [a financial reference](#)
- your business plan
- your cash-flow forecast
- your last 2 annual reports, including reports for any holding company and any subsidiaries
- your last 2 annual accounts
- your [charitable objects](#)

Local authorities and trusts

If you are a children's trust through which a local authority discharges its adoption agency functions, you do not need to provide your financial reference, business plan, cash-flow forecast or annual reports. As an alternative, as well as any annual accounts, you can provide a letter from the local authority that sets out:

- an assurance that it is content with the financial viability of the trust (this could be in the form of a service-level agreement or a memorandum of understanding)
- what mechanisms it has in place to review the ongoing performance of the trust, including its financial standing

Fees

You will need to pay an [application fee](#) for the principal office and for each separate branch. The fee you pay depends on the size of the principal office and the number and size of branches.

Registration timescales

Once we have received everything necessary for your application to register, we usually make a decision within 47 days. We recommend that you allow at least 16 weeks from the start of your application before you intend to open. You cannot operate before you're registered.

After registration

You will receive a certificate of registration.

You need to pay an annual fee for the office and for each branch. The amount depends on the number and size of the principal office and any branches. We will contact you when any fees are due.

What you need to tell us

You must [use the SC4 form](#) to tell us:

- about any new branches
- if your principal office or any of your existing branches change size

The responsible individual or another senior officer must submit the SC4 form to us at least 28 days before the change.

You must [use the SC3 form](#) to tell us about:

- any changes to managers
- any new branch managers

You can find further information about [changes to registered children's social care services](#).

Conditions of registration

Conditions of registration describe the services that the voluntary adoption agency is registered to provide, for example:

- domestic adoption services
- inter-country adoption services
- adoption support services for children/adults/both
- birth records counselling
- intermediary services

After registration, you will receive a certificate that details the conditions of your registration. It is an offence not to follow these. The [social care compliance handbook](#) sets out information about actions we may take if you do not follow your conditions.

If we grant registration with conditions that you have not agreed, you may object by making a 'written representation' to us. For information on this, see the [social care compliance handbook](#).

Once registered, you will need to apply for a [variation to conditions of registration](#) if you intend to provide other services.

Inspections

We inspect voluntary adoption agencies as set out in the [social care common inspection framework](#).

We normally inspect new agencies for the first time between 7 and 12 months from the date of registration, unless there are no children placed by the agency.

Voluntary adoption agencies receive one inspection in a 3-year window and one overall judgement, irrespective of the number of branches they use.

You can find information on [how we inspect voluntary adoption agencies and independent fostering agencies that provide fostering for adoption services](#).

Complaints and concerns

We may receive complaints or concerns about a voluntary adoption agency. We will take these seriously and we may take actions as a result, as set out in our [guidance about social care concerns](#).

There is also guidance on how we respond to concerns in our [social care compliance handbook](#).

Compliance and enforcement

Our [social care compliance handbook](#) provides more information about what will happen if you do not meet the [relevant regulations](#).

Fostering for adoption

The Care Standards Act 2000 requires you to register as an [independent fostering agency](#) if you are going to offer:

- fostering for adoption
- concurrent planning

Fostering for adoption and concurrent planning are early permanence services. These enable children to live with foster carers who later go on to adopt them if the court decides that is in the children's best interests.

List of regulations

General legislation

- [Care Standards Act 2000: legal definitions of all agencies and establishments we register](#)
- [The Care Standards Act 2000 \(Registration\)\(England\) Regulations 2010](#)
- [The Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills \(Fees and Frequency of Inspections\)\(Children's Homes etc.\) Regulations 2015](#)
- [The Care Standards Act 2000 \(Establishments and Agencies\) \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2002](#)

Adoption legislation

- [The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005](#)
- [The Adoption Support Agencies \(England\) and Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2005](#)
- [Adoption Support Agencies \(England\)\(Amendment\) Regulations 2010](#)
- [The Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations \(Amendment\) Regulations 2011](#)
- [The Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2013](#)
- [The Adoption Information and Intermediary Services \(Pre-Commencement Adoptions\) Regulations 2005](#)
- [The Arrangements for Placement of Children by Voluntary Organisations and Others \(England\) Regulations 2011](#)
- [The Disclosure of Adoption Information \(Post-Commencement Adoptions\) Regulations 2005](#)
- [The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2003](#)
- [The Adoption and Children \(Coronavirus\)\(Amendment\) Regulations 2020](#)

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