

LEGAL EXPLAINER

This guide outlines the legal timeline for adoption in England and Wales. It is not exhaustive (for other laws and regulations for all four nations you can search the UK government website for all statutes relating to [adoption](#) or [children](#)).

[1926 Adoption Act](#)

First adoption Act, legalised adoption, offering an alternative to previous unregulated practices.

- Established legal transference of parental rights as irrevocable, and legitimisation of child on adoption.
- Adoptees explicitly excluded from inheriting property from adoptive parents.
- Established the Guardian ad Litem role to protect the best interests of the child during an adoption hearing.
- Instituted the Adopted Children's Register (ACR) to be maintained by the General Register Office (GRO), and the direction that all original birth certificates should be marked 'adopted'.
- Directed that the ACR be publicly searchable, but GRO-maintained indexes to resolve first identities to adopted ones, be private.

[1939 Adoption of Children \(Regulation\) Act](#)

Created as a result of the report of the Horsburgh Committee, which found significant malpractice amongst unsupervised adoption agencies.

- Directed that adoption agencies register with a local authority, non-compliance to result in imprisonment or a fine.
- Mandated that first mothers be given clear information about the effects of an adoption order and the process.
- Outlawed advertisements in relation to adoption.
- Confirmed that children could not be sent abroad for adoption, and made provisions for British subjects abroad to be able to adopt with the consent of a police magistrate.

[1949 Adoption of Children Act](#)

- Clarified that parents could adopt their own children.
- Gave the courts power to dispense with parental consent to adoption in cases of e.g. neglect, or if they could not be found.
- Established that first mothers could not consent until at least 6 weeks after birth.
- Instituted a probation period of at least three months before adoptive parents could apply for an adoption order.
- Confirmed that adoptees would become UK citizens if their adoptive parents were.
- Gave adopted children the right to inherit from their adopters, excluding titles or associated land or property.

[1949 Adoption of Children \(County Court\) Rules \(Statutory Instrument\)](#)

- Allowed adoptive parents to apply for a serial number to be used in place of a name to maintain secrecy from first family.
- Instructed the Guardian ad Litem to investigate the proposed adoption and make a report to the Court.

- All proceedings and documents to be treated as confidential.

1958 Adoption Act

Created as a result of the Hurst Committee, which recommended a greater emphasis on the welfare of the child, and amendments to clarify existing law.

- Consolidated previous acts and outlined Local Authority rights and responsibilities.
- Made it easier for the Court to dispense with parental rights.
- Clarified that once adopted, a child would be legitimate for other purposes in law.
- Prevented first parents who had signed an initial consent order from removing the child without the Court's agreement, once the adoption process had started.

1968 Adoption Act

Implemented The Hague Convention of 1965 to recognise international adoptions.

1975 Children Act

- Gave adoptees the right to apply to the GRO for their birth certificate.
- Imposed a duty on local authorities to provide counselling for adoptees receiving their birth certificates.

1976 Adoption Act

Consolidated previous acts, and regulated and professionalised adoption.

- Prohibited private adoptions.

1989 Children Act

Amended the 1976 Act to establish the Adoption Contact Register.

2002 Adoption and Children Act

Comprehensive update and expansion of adoption provisions.

- Gave Local Authorities the duty to provide adoption support services
- Removed the prohibition on same sex couples.
- Introduced the concept of Special Guardianship.
- Gave adoptees adopted after 30 December 2005 from the age of 18, the right to their birth certificate and the information provided to their adoptive parents at the time of adoption (post-commencement adoption).
- Gave first families the right to request an intermediary service to contact an adoptee (if they were adopted before 30 December 2005 in a pre-commencement adoption).
- Established right of birth families to request an assessment of adoption support needs, and to request intermediary services.

2005 The Adoption Information and Intermediary Services (Pre-Commencement) Adoptions Regulations (Statutory Instrument)

Governs support and intermediary services for adoptions before 30 December 2005.

2005 Adoption Support Services Regulations (Statutory Instrument)

Governs arrangements for managing and supporting adoptions from 2005 onwards.

2010 Adoption Support Services Regulations were amended to the effect that only counsellors and psychotherapists registered as an adoption support agency with OFSTED were able to deliver counselling on adoption.

[2014 Adoption: National Minimum Standards](#)

Published under the Care Standards Act 2000, and with the Adoption Support Services Regulations provide the framework under which OFSTED regulate adoption agencies and adoption support agencies.

2014 The 2002 Adoption and Children Act was [amended](#) to give siblings and descendants of an adoptee the right to an intermediary service.

2022 The Joint Committee on Human Rights [published a report](#) on historic forced adoption practices, which found the right to a family life of many mothers and children was violated during the period 1949-1976. It recommended an apology on behalf of the state by the UK government and mitigations.

2023 Adoption Support Services Regulations were [amended](#) to remove the requirement for counsellors and psychotherapists working with adult adoptees to be registered with an adoption support agency and overseen by Ofsted.

2024 Chief Archivists in Local Government Group [published good practice guidance](#) for record keepers and care professionals, covering adoption records.

2025 Adoption England commissioned a [practice guide for adoption and intermediary services](#)

2025 Chief Archivists in Local Government Group produced [recommendations for adoption records](#)