



Quality. Integrity. Respect.

Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers

Responding to enquiries

Throughout the process of enquiry and assessment, potential carers will be guided through the process and treated with respect. They will work with members of staff who are able to pass on relevant information, and have the skills to respond to any queries potential applicants may have. They will be kept informed of the progress of their application and assessment, which will be presented to the Fostering Panel no later than eight months from the receipt of the application, unless additional checks, references or information are required, in which case applicants will be told of the reason for the delay and the anticipated timescale to complete the assessment.

On receipt of an enquiry from a potential foster carer, an administrative officer will record the enquirer's details which must include:

- Full name, date of birth, address and telephone number;
- Email contact address;
- Date of request;

Within 2 working days of any enquiry, AFA will contact the enquirer to confirm that their enquiry has been logged and a member of staff will be in contact soon. AFA aims to contact the enquirer again within a further 2 days to undertake a screening call. The screening call helps AFA decide if a home visit should be undertaken.

Initial Visit to enquirers and application

Following a successful screening call, the Area Manager will arrange for a worker to make a follow up call to the enquirer and arrange to make a visit to their home. The allocated worker will contact the enquirer within 5 working days.

The purpose of the initial visit is to give further information to the potential applicants about AFA, the role of a foster carer and the skills, experience, knowledge and aptitudes required for fostering. The worker will outline the assessment and approval process and discuss any relevant health, offending, accommodation, employment and/or financial issues with the potential applicants. Following this visit the worker will advise the potential applicants whether it is appropriate to for them to make a formal application.

A second initial visit may be required to cover areas not explored during the first visit or discuss further any areas of concern highlighted during the initial visit. At any time in the initial stages or later when an assessment is being carried out, the allocated worker may be accompanied by a colleague. Potential applicants should not be concerned by workers making joint visits, it

ensures consistency in the standard of work undertaken and also facilitates one worker carrying out an interview whilst the other observes and takes notes.

Potential applicants will be advised not to pursue their interest in fostering if they have recently faced significant challenges within their family, for example, newly formed or recently ended partnerships, serious ill health, pregnancy, adoption or bereavement.

Potential applicants may also be advised not to pursue an application where it is considered that the application would be inappropriate having regard to information gathered at the initial visit.

Potential applicants will be asked if they have fostered or applied to foster before and, if so the name and contact details of relevant agencies. Fostering regulations clearly state that a Foster Carer can only be approved by one fostering service provider at any time. However, there are guidelines which outline the action to be taken to carry out an assessment with, for example, AFA, whilst being approved by an alternative agency. If an assessment for AFA has a positive outcome the newly approved carers will be supported to submit their resignation to their initial approving agency so that there is no overlap of approval.

An application pack will be given to the enquirers who are invited to apply which gives additional information about fostering and AFA, our Statement of Purpose, an Application Form and Consent to Checks Form.

If there are reasons for not inviting potential applicants to complete and submit an application, the manager will write, setting out the reasons for their decision not to proceed. Advice should be given on the steps that can be taken if they disagree with the decision.

Where there is agreement from the Area Manager to apply, the enquirer/s will be asked to complete an application form along with the Disclosure and Barring Service forms for all members of the household aged 18 and over. Applicants will also be asked to have a medical, other agency checks will be carried out and the names of four personal referees will be requested.

Applicants are also required to sign a written agreement with the agency stating that the information they have provided is true and they are aware that failure to comply with the agreement will lead to a refusal to accept their application. At the point the application is accepted by AFA, stage 1 of the Form F process will start.

Stage 1

Stage 1 of the assessment involves undertaking the checks and references, as well as both applicants (if a couple applying jointly) completing a medical. This period allows further consideration by AFA as to the suitability of applicants to progress to a full assessment and also provides applicants with the opportunity to fully consider if they have the necessary skills to undertake what is a very challenging and complex task. Stage 1 also includes attendance at Skills to Foster training.

Skills to Foster training

The name of the applicant/s will be put on the list for the next Skills to Foster course during this period and, where possible, the training will be undertaken prior to completion of stage 1. Applicants are expected to attend all sessions of the Skills to Foster training and in the case of a joint application both must attend.

Attendance at, and the contribution to, the Skills to Foster course will form part of the assessment of the applicant's suitability to become foster carer/s. Skills to Foster training provides an opportunity for AFA staff to find out more about the applicants and have a clearer idea of their strengths, areas for further work and any concerns that need to be clarified as part of the assessment process. The Skills to Foster course also enables applicants to find out more about fostering and consider whether fostering is right for them and their family.

The group facilitators will complete a record of observations of the applicants which will be shared with them and the assessing Social Worker as part of the assessment. This will also form part of the final report presented to the Fostering Panel.

If an application to foster is considered not to be appropriate because of information emerging from the group or interviews with the assessing Social Worker (e.g. If there are safeguarding concerns in relation to the family) the applicant will be contacted and offered a meeting to discuss AFA's concerns. Applicants are reminded that Foster Carers look after particularly vulnerable and traumatized children and AFA, being a child focused service, will always put the best interests of children and young people first. It is vital that AFA are robust in their enquiries to ensure that our carers can provide safe, secure and nurturing placements.

Checks

The applicants and everyone aged 18 or over living in or regularly visiting the household will be asked to complete Disclosure and Barring Service forms and produce the necessary identification. These will be processed online by AFA.

Administrative staff in the fostering service will also carry out checks with Local Authority Children's Social Care Services in whose area the applicant has lived during the last 10 years. This will include asking for a check to be made as to whether any of the applicant's own children have at any time been subject to a Child Protection Plan. Where applicants have moved to the UK within the last 10 years, checks will be made with the relevant countries for all adults in the household. A check will also be made to ensure that applicants have the right to work in the UK.

AFA will also write to schools or other educational establishments for information relating to applicant's own children.

Where the applicant has made a previous application to foster or adopt, the relevant agency must be asked to confirm in writing the outcome of the application. AFA will discuss the family's previous involvement with the agency and ask to view files where available.

AFA administrative staff will record the date when checks were sent and the dates when replies were received. Replies to the checks will be recorded on the carers' record. The checks will advise AFA as to whether the applicant or a member of the household is a disqualified person.

In this regard, the agency will ensure they are compliant with the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards 2011, Standard 13 Recruiting and Assessing Foster Carers who can meet the needs of Looked after Children and the Fostering Services Regulations 2011. Regulation 27 outlines the circumstances where an applicant/carer or a member of the person's household means that they would not be seen as suitable to become a Foster Carer. This relates to specific offences being committed or concerns being expressed about the welfare of a child.

For new applications

If DBS checks reveal that an applicant for approval as a foster carer is a disqualified person, the applicants will be advised that their application cannot proceed. This will be confirmed in writing and a copy filed with their application form.

Health

All applicants must undertake a full medical assessment with their GP on their health and any other relevant issues. Applicants will be given a BAAF Form AH Adult Health Report for the GP to complete. The GP's fee will be met by AFA.

The report will be passed from the Medical Adviser to the Fostering Panel, who should be asked to consider the content and implications of the report. Medical advice will also be referred to in the final report submitted to the Panel.

If the applicant's GP has expressed concerns, or where clarification of any health issues is required, advice should be requested from the Medical Adviser by the Fostering Panel at an early stage, and the implications of any health or other issues (such as alcohol consumption) fully discussed with the applicant. It may be necessary for the Medical Adviser to speak directly to the GP or for reports from other health professionals to be obtained.

References

The applicants will be asked to provide the names and contact details of four personal referees. These should be adults who have known the applicants for at least 5 years in a personal capacity and are not related to the applicants. Only one of the 4 personal references can be obtained from a family member. In the case of joint applications to foster, personal references should cover the qualities and suitability to foster of both applicants and if this is not the case additional personal references may be requested.

A further reference must be obtained from each applicant's current employer. In addition, where the applicant has frequently changed jobs, written references should also be obtained from past employers. Details of any past employment involving the care of children must be given to the assessing social worker and written references requested.

Administrative staff will send out requests for references, enclosing standard forms for completion by the referees. If the applicant proceeds these will be interviewed as part of the stage 2 process (see below).

References from ex-partners should be obtained where there has been joint parenting of children or if the children in the household are under 18 years at the time of the assessment.

If there is no response to an initial request for a reference, from any source, a follow up request should be sent out. If there continues to be no response the administrator undertaking the checks should consult with the Area Manager to identify other suitable referees or sources of information to ensure that the final report is robust and supports the evidence given by the applicant/s. This process may also occur during stage 2 (see below).

Completion of stage 1

At the end of stage 1, all the information available will be collated and the area manager will decide whether to proceed to the next stage of the assessment. Any concerns relating to the applicants will be fully discussed with them to ensure that any information shared has been

fully understood by AFA and verified independently through references and checks. Following this, AFA will decide whether or not the application should proceed and the applicant will be informed of the outcome and the reasons for the decision.

AFA, within 10 working days of obtaining all the information set out in Part 1, Schedule 3 (Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (England) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulation 2013) must decide whether to continue to assess the suitability to become a foster parent (termed a pre-assessment decision). If the decision is to go ahead the agency will set out the process for the assessment. If the decision is not to proceed, this decision and the supporting reasons, should be conveyed in writing. If the enquiry ends at this stage, no further action is required.

If it is agreed that the assessment should continue, the area manager will allocate the applicants to an assessing social worker who will undertake a full assessment. If the allocated social worker is less experienced, he or she will conduct the assessment alongside an experienced worker.

Stage 2

The time taken to complete the assessment from the receipt of the application form until presentation to the Fostering Panel will be no longer than eight months. However, if an issue arises during the course of an assessment which requires a decision as to the future direction of the assessment, and this cannot be resolved by discussion between the assessing social worker and the applicant or his/her manager, consideration should be given to an early referral to the Fostering Panel. All matters outlined in Part 2 Schedule 3 (see above for relevant legislation) need to be covered prior but, if the fostering service do not wish to proceed with the assessment a brief report can be presented to Panel. The Panel's recommendation as stated in the final minutes of the meeting will then be forwarded to the Decision Maker who will make a decision. The applicants can appeal the decision through the Independent Review Mechanism or, at their request, back to the Fostering Panel for reconsideration.

All fostering assessments will be completed on BAAF Form F using the competence based model which requires evidence of:

- Caring for children;
- Providing a safer caring environment;
- Working as part of a team;
- Own development.

The assessment will also look at the applicants' understanding and ability to deal with children's behavior, including encouraging children to take responsibility for their behaviour and helping them to learn how to resolve conflict and work cooperatively.

The assessing social worker will carry out a series of interviews with the applicant(s) and all children living in the household will be interviewed as part of the assessment. This will be conducted by the assessing social worker taking into account the age and level of understanding of the child or young person.

In addition, all adults living in the household and adult birth children living elsewhere, should be interviewed by the assessing social worker.

The suitability of the accommodation must be assessed and a health and safety checklist and fire plan completed, along with an assessment of the risk posed by any pets in the household. Any issues relating to the accommodation available should be recorded in the Form F.

The number and size of bedrooms available for fostered children should be discussed as part of the assessment. The Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011 states that each child over the age of 3 should have their own bedroom or, where this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom has been agreed by the placing authority.

The assessment will take into account the outcome of checks carried out and the references obtained. The assessing social worker will interview the personal referees and make a written record of his/her visit. If referees have not responded to requests, the assessing Social Worker is to liaise with the agency and the applicants to identify alternative sources for references.

The assessment will also consider information obtained and observations made during the Skills to Foster training. The completed Form F should provide a summary and give a recommendation as to whether the applicant should be approved and if so, the proposed terms of approval. The Form F report will include a chronology, references and checks and evidence of existing or potential competencies.

The report should be shared with and signed by the applicant who should have an opportunity to comment on the assessment. Any written comments will be circulated to Fostering Panel members along with the report. The report should also be signed and dated by the assessing social worker and their manager.

Applicants should be prepared by the assessing social worker to attend Panel and given a leaflet which outlines the process and possible outcomes.

Presentation to the Fostering Panel

All the relevant information (incorporating a report from the Skills to Foster course, the applicant's comments, references, a written report on visits to referees, chronology, completed Health and Safety checklist, pet assessment where appropriate, full information on all the statutory checks received and the Medical Adviser's report) is collated into a final report which is circulated to the Panel at least 5 working days before the meeting. The report must be submitted to AFA by the assessing social worker within the timeframe given, but no less than 1 month prior to the date of Panel.

The assessing social worker should inform the Panel Administrator about the arrangements for the applicants to attend and whether they require additional support such as an interpreter. Applicants should be encouraged and supported to attend Panel, but it is their decision and will not prejudice consideration of their application.

For further information relating to the fostering panel, please see the separate Fostering Panel Policy.

After the Fostering Panel's recommendation

After the Fostering Panel has considered the report and made a recommendation, the Panel Administrator will send the minutes of the meeting to the Decision Maker. The Decision Maker will consider all the reports and make a decision as to the suitability of the applicant to foster. This decision must be made within 7 working days of the Decision Maker receiving the minutes. His/her decision must be recorded along with the reasons.

Where the application is approved, the terms of approval must be specified. Arrangements will be made for the applicants to be given verbal notification of the decision within 2 working days and confirmation of the decision, in writing with supporting reasons, within 5 working days of the decision.

If a decision is made to approve a foster carer, written notice of the decision and the terms of approval, signed by the Decision Maker, will be sent to foster carers with two copies of the Foster Carer Agreement, one of which must be signed and returned by the carers.

Representations/Independent Review Mechanism

If the Decision Maker makes a decision not to approve, this should be conveyed using the same process as above but, in addition, information should be included in the letter about the options for appealing against the decision.

The applicant will be advised that if he or she wishes to challenge the decision, he/she has the right to submit a written representation to the Fostering Panel within 28 days of the date of receiving the written notice of the decision. If written representations are made within the period, the matter must be referred back to the Panel for further consideration. The Panel will hear any representations and make a recommendation following this. The Panel may uphold its original recommendation or make a different recommendation as a result of the applicant's representations. The Panel's recommendation will be sent to the Decision Maker who will make his/ her decision within 7 working days of receiving the minutes of the Panel meeting. Written notice of the decision and the reasons for it will be sent to the applicant within 2 working days of the decision being made.

As an alternative, carers can apply to the Secretary of State to request a review of the decision by the Independent Review Mechanism. An application must be made in writing within 28 days of the notice of the decision being received.

If the applicant decides to refer the matter to an Independent Review, the relevant Panel reports, any new information obtained since the Panel meeting, a record of the decision made and reasons, and a copy of the written notification of the decision will be sent to the Independent Review within 10 working days of their written request for information.

The procedure for the Independent Review is carried out by BAAF and the applicant and two representatives of the fostering agency will be invited to attend the Independent Review. After considering the representations, the Independent Review will make a recommendation, which the Decision Maker will consider before making a final decision. Written notice of the decision, together with reasons, must be sent to the applicant within 7 working days of receipt by the Decision Maker of the Independent Review recommendation.

The only circumstances where the carer will not have the right to request a review by an Independent Review Mechanism is if he or she is regarded as disqualified as a result of a conviction or caution for a specified offence, as highlighted above.

If no written notification of a request to appeal is received, the Decision Maker's decision to not approve the applicant can be confirmed.

After Approval

Where an application is approved, the foster carer will be allocated a Placement Manager. It will be the Placement Manager's responsibility to supervise and support the carer and to be their primary point of contact.

Foster carer agreement

The Placement Manager will ensure that the foster carer has signed and returned a Foster Care Agreement, which will be sent out with the letter confirming approval. The agreement

incorporates the information a foster carer needs to effectively carry out his or her role as a foster carer. The foster carer will be given two copies for signature, and will retain one signed copy.

The agreement will be kept on the foster carer's case record, together with the Form F report and supporting documents presented to the Fostering Panel, and a copy of the Panel's recommendation and relevant minutes. Newly approved carers will be given a copy of the Foster Carer's Handbook, which covers policies, procedures, guidance, legal information and insurance details and allowance guidelines

Carers will need to give the Placement Manager details of their bank account and their availability to consider potential placements. The Placement Manager will continue to provide support and supervision to a foster carer up to, during and after all placements.

Carer profiles

During the assessment process, applicants will be asked for information and photographs to complete a profile. The profile should contain visual and written information and will be used to introduce any child who is to be placed to members of the foster family, the foster home, any pets, information about the activities the foster family enjoy and any other relevant information. This information will be sent to a local authority at the point of a potential match, in readiness to share with any child who may be placed.

An additional profile will be created for any Local Authority, which will contain the above and information on the facilities and environment are local to the carers, any special skills or experience they have, the type of behaviours they work well with and their willingness to manage contact with parents. This information will be used to identify the suitability of the placement to meet the needs of specific children. It will be sent to referring social workers when a foster carers has been identified as a potential match.

Connected Policies or guidance

Name of policy / Guidance	Relevant for
Expectations of Foster Carers Behaviour	Carers, Placement Managers and Senior staff
Foster Carers Handbook	Foster Carers and Placement Managers
Safeguarding Policy	All staff and Foster Carers
Management of Allegations Against Staff and Carers	Foster carers and Placement Managers
Notification of Significant Events	Placement Managers and Senior Managers
Review of Foster Carers	Placement Manager, Foster carers
Fostering Panel Policy	Placement Manager, Foster carers, senior staff, panel members
Supervision, Support and Training of Foster Carers	Foster carers, all staff
Foster Panel Handbook	Panel members, senior managers
Office Process Guides	All staff

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