



## **The Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers**

### **Responding to enquiries**

Throughout the initial enquiry and assessment, potential carers will be guided through the process and treated with sensitivity and respect. Applicants will be kept up to date with the status of their enquiry and supported by members of staff who will pass on relevant information and respond to any queries. Information on the progress of the application and assessment will be shared and, in line with legislation and guidance, AFA will aim to present the completed assessment to the Fostering Panel no later than eight months from the date the application was made. This timescale is dependent on the application being accepted and all checks, references and information having been received and satisfactory.

Prospective carers will be advised of the reason for any delay and, in those cases where there have been significant changes in the applicant's circumstances, an assessment can be suspended for an agreed period of time. If further information is required, or if there are any concerns highlighted by the assessment process, AFA will review and feedback the outcome of any additional enquiries, other than those from third parties who have not given consent to share information.

Having received an enquiry from a potential Foster Carer, an Admin Officer will record the following:

- Full name, date of birth, address, and telephone number.
- Email address.
- Date the enquiry was received.

Within 2 working days of contacting AFA you will receive confirmation that your enquiry has been logged and that a member of staff will be contacting you. Within a further 2 working days AFA aim to contact you for a screening call. This will help AFA decide if a home visit should be carried out.

### **Application and initial visit**

Following a successful screening call, a Manager will contact you and arrange a home visit. The allocated worker will contact you within 5 working days.

The purpose of the initial visit is to give you further information about the role of a Foster Carer and the skills, experience and knowledge required. The worker will outline the assessment and approval process and discuss any health, accommodation, employment, or financial issues. Following the visit, a worker will advise the applicant as to whether they should make a formal application.

Currently we are working within Government guidelines, adapting our practice in response to the ever changing situation brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Within this context, while a face to face visit will be considered, for a number of reasons (please see related documents) it may be that this is not deemed possible, in which circumstance, a virtual initial visit will be offered.

A second home visit (face to face or virtual) may be needed to cover areas not explored during the initial visit or discuss any areas of uncertainty or concern. At any time in the initial, or later stages of an assessment, an allocated worker may be accompanied by a colleague. Co-working can be helpful to ensure that all areas of the assessment have been fully addressed. It also supports the worker who is carrying out the interview by having a colleague observe and take notes.

Potential applicants will be advised:

- Not to continue at this time, 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.
- Not to continue if the information gathered during initial or subsequent visits indicates that they would not be suitable to foster.
- Not to continue if AFA have received checks and references that indicate an applicant is not suitable to foster.
- Not to continue if the type of placement the applicant wishes to provide is not routinely requested, which may make it difficult or unlikely that a child or young person will be placed with the carers.

If there are reasons for not inviting potential applicants to formally apply, a Manager will write to them, setting out the background to his/her decision. Advice will be given regarding the steps that can be taken if an enquirer disagrees with the Agency's decision.

All those making enquires will be asked if they have fostered or applied to foster previously and, if so, the name and contact details of the relevant Agencies will be requested. Fostering regulations clearly state that a Foster Carer can only be approved by one Fostering Service provider (FSP) at any time. However, there is Fostering Network guidance as to how carers can transfer from one Agency to another

Carers currently approved by any Agency other than AFA must give them 28 days' notice. At the end of the 28 days the carer will no longer be approved with that Agency, but AFA will ensure that the assessment is presented to Panel in good time so as to ensure that there is no gap between the previous and AFA approval.

It is important that carers transferring from other Agencies to AFA understand that we cannot guarantee approval. If there are issues that require additional work or further enquiries, AFA will make every effort to address these in a timely manner. However, our focus is, and always will be, ensuring the children we care for are safe, well cared for and supported to reach their potential.

An application pack will be given to those enquirers who are invited to apply. This gives additional information about AFA including an Application Form and Consent to Checks Form. 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 their application being refused. When an application is accepted by AFA, Stage 1 of the Fostering Assessment process will begin.

One of the first tasks, when an application has been accepted, is for the potential Foster Carer/s to complete Disclosure and Barring Service forms for all members of the household aged 18 and over. Applicants will also be asked to arrange a medical and give consent for all other Agency checks, such as education and employers. The application also requires the contact details of four personal referees who have known the applicant/s over a long period of time.

In exceptional circumstances the process as outlined above, may involve more 'virtual' meetings and engagement rather than face to face visits (see page 2). However, good practice may mean that AFA staff will want to visit potential applicants in their own home before accepting an application. Should circumstances prevent them from making a home visit, there may be a delay to the usual timescales. If this is the case, there will be further discussion with the enquires to consider the best way forward.

## **Stage 1 of the Assessment**

This involves carrying out checks including a medical and also a financial assessment. This stage allows further consideration by AFA as to the suitability of applicants to progress to a full assessment. It also provides applicants with the opportunity to consider if they have the necessary skills and patience to undertake what is a very challenging and complex task. During Stage 1 applicants will be asked to attend Skills to Foster training.

### **Skills to Foster training**

The applicant/s will be put on the list for the next available Skills to Foster course and, where possible, the training will be undertaken prior to completion of Stage 1 but after the completion of the financial assessment. 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 contribution to, the Skills to Foster course will form part of the assessment of an applicant's suitability to become a Foster Carer. Skills to Foster training provides an opportunity for AFA staff to find out more about the applicants and develop a clearer idea of their strengths and areas needing development as well as any concerns raised during the assessment. The Skills to Foster course also enable applicants to find out more about fostering and consider whether it is right for them and their family.

Depending on the situation, part or all of the Skills to Foster Training may be run virtually (via video call). Any arrangement to do so will be fully discussed with applicants. It remains important for the trainers to have the opportunity to meet applicants face to face as part of their evaluation, and this will be borne in mind if there are plans to run any part of the course virtually.

The group facilitators will complete a record of observations for each of the applicants, which will be shared with them and the assessing Social Worker. This information 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, for example, if there are safeguarding concerns, the applicant will be contacted and offered a meeting to discuss these. Applicants are reminded that Foster Carers care for vulnerable and traumatised 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.

Admin staff will also carry out checks with Local Authority Children's Social Care Services in the area/s where the applicant has lived during the previous 10 years. This will include asking for a check to be made on the applicant's own children to see if they have been subject to a Child Protection Plan. Where applicants over the age of 18 have moved to the UK during the last 10 years, checks will be made with the Countries they have lived in for all adults in the household. A check will also be made to ensure that applicants have the right to work in the UK. In some circumstances, in order to triangulate information, AFA reserve the right to seek information from other Local Authorities where the applicants have lived, outside of the 10-year timescale.

AFA will contact schools or other educational establishments for information relating to the applicant's own children. If an 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. AFA admin staff will record the date when checks were sent out and when replies were received. Replies from all the checks will be recorded on the carer's electronic and paper files. Checks are rigorous to ensure that an applicant or a member of their household is not a disqualified person or someone who could pose a risk to the vulnerable children we care for. AFA ensure their practice is compliant with the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards 2011 and the Fostering Services Regulations 2011.

## **Health Checks**

All applicants must undertake a full medical assessment with their GP regarding their health and lifestyle. Applicants will be given a BAAF Adult Health Report for their GP to complete and return and any fees will be met by AFA. The GP's report will be forwarded to the Agency Medical Adviser. This information will not be viewed by AFA staff, nor will a copy of it be kept on our records.

If circumstances arise that, for a period of time, GP surgeries are unable to complete medical reports, self-declaration forms may be requested from applicants as an alternative until a full medical can be carried out.

Information which has implications for the approval or suitability of an applicant will be passed from the Medical Adviser to the Fostering service. It is very important, at every stage, that GDPR requirements are followed. The information collected during an assessment is highly confidential and will never be shared with anyone other than as requested and agreed by the applicant. Applicants need to be aware that medical advice may be included in the final report submitted to Panel.

If the applicant's GP has expressed concerns, or where there is a need for further information, the Medical Adviser will be contacted at an early stage so that any health or other issue (such as alcohol consumption) can be fully discussed with the applicant/s early on in the assessment.

## **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. 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 required.

In addition, where the applicant has frequently changed jobs, written references will also be requested from past employers. Details of any past employment involving the care of children

or vulnerable adults must be given to the assessing Social Worker and written references will be requested.

Admin staff will send out requests for references, enclosing standard forms for completion by the referees. If the assessment continues the referees 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.

### **Completion of stage 1**

At the end of stage 1, all the information available will be collated and the responsible Manager will decide whether to proceed to the next stage of the assessment. Any concerns relating to the applicants will have been discussed as and when they arise.

Within 10 working days of obtaining all the information set out in Stage 1 [Schedule 3 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (England) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulation 2013)] AFA must decide whether to continue with the assessment. If the decision is to go ahead the assessing Social Worker will need to outline any work, including checks and references, necessary to complete the Form F report.

If the decision is not to proceed, a letter will be sent by the responsible Manager to the applicants giving the reason/s for not continuing with the assessment. If the enquiry ends at this point no further action is required, but the applicant must be advised as to how they can make a formal complaint.

### **Moving on to Stage 2**

The time taken to complete an assessment from receiving the application form until presentation to the Fostering Panel should be no longer than eight months. However, if an issue arises during the course of an assessment which requires a decision, and this cannot be resolved by discussion between the assessing Social Worker, his/her Manager and the applicant, consideration should be given to referring the case to the Fostering Panel.

All matters outlined in Part 2 Schedule 3 need to be covered, but if the Area Manager decides not to proceed with the assessment a brief report can be presented to Panel. The Panel's recommendation, as stated in the minutes of the meeting, will then be forwarded to the Decision Maker who will decide what further action if any is undertaken. The applicants can appeal the decision through the Independent Review Mechanism or, at their request, go back to the Fostering Panel.

All fostering assessments will be completed using the Agency's Fostering Assessment Report format (FAR); a competency based model that requires supporting evidence for each of the seven, Support & Development Standards, as follows:

- Principles and Values
- Role of a Foster Carer
- Health and Safety and Healthy Care
- Effective Communication

- Understanding Development
- Keeping Children Safe
- Developing Yourself

The assessment will also look at the applicant's level of understanding and ability to care for children and young people. The assessing Social Worker will carry out a series of interviews with the applicant(s) and all children living in the home. The discussions with the young people in the home, and any adult children no longer living at home, will be carried out by the assessing Social Worker, considering the age and level of understanding of the children.

The suitability of the accommodation must be assessed, and a Health and Safety Checklist and Fire Plan completed, along with an assessment of any pets. Any health and safety issues should be recorded in the Form F, along with an action plan and timescale for any work to be undertaken. There is an expectation that all work required will be completed by the time the case is presented to the Fostering Panel.

Some of the meetings or discussions necessary for the assessment may take place virtually via video calls. Any decision to do so will be dependent on individual circumstances and fully discussed with the applicants. However, the Agency is unlikely to wholly rely on such interviews given the nature and complexities of the assessment involved. As detailed in AFA's Guidance for Fostering Assessments C-19, no applicants will be presented to the AFA Fostering Panel for approval if they have not been visited (in person) by AFA staff and/or an independent assessor.

The number and size of bedrooms available for fostered children will be discussed as part of the assessment as 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 must have been agreed by the Placing Authority.

The assessment will take into account the information received from checks and references. The assessing Social Worker will interview the personal referees and make a written record of his/her visit. If referees have not responded to a request to make contact the assessing Social Worker will liaise with the applicants to identify alternative referees.

The assessment will also consider observations made during the Skills to Foster training. The completed Form F must make a recommendation as to whether the applicant should be approved and if so, the proposed terms of approval. The report should include a chronology, details of any gaps in the applicant's knowledge or understanding, and any training they may need. Any difficulties the applicants may have in meeting the expectations of carers, for example, writing up daily logs, need to be highlighted early in the assessment so that support and equipment has been identified and where necessary is available.

The report should be shared with the applicants, giving sufficient time for them to read it and highlight any errors or differences of opinion. Any written comments will be fed back 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 having been given a leaflet which outlines the process and the possible outcomes of the meeting.

## **Presentation to the Fostering Panel**

All the relevant information, which includes the main report and feedback from the Skills to Foster course; the applicant's comments, references and written reports from visits to referees, are gathered together. A chronology is also included, as is confirmation of the discussion and completion of any issues highlighted in statutory checks; for example, the Medical Adviser's report or health and safety related documents. The report is circulated to Panel members at least 5 working days before the meeting. However, 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 of any additional support the applicants may need, for example, an interpreter. Applicants should be encouraged and supported to attend Panel, but it is their decision and will not prejudice their application. For further information relating to the Fostering Panel, please see the Fostering Panel Policy.

### **Following on from the 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 Chair and Panel Adviser, having first made any amendments requested. The minutes are then circulated to those Panel Members who attended the relevant meeting. They will return the report, with suggested amendments, to the Administrator. The final version of the minutes, signed by the Chair, is then forwarded to the Decision Maker.

Up until the minutes are a final version, they are the responsibility of the Chair, who can make substantive amendments. The Panel Advisor and Coordinator can amend minor grammar, punctuation, and factual errors, but they cannot make significant changes that alter the meaning of the report. The Decision Maker will consider all the reports and the Panel's recommendation. He/she will 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 final minutes. His/her decision must be recorded along with the supporting evidence.

If 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 written confirmation within 5 working days of the ADM's decision.

If the decision is to approve, a written notice of the decision and the terms of approval, signed by the Decision Maker, will be sent to the newly approved Foster Carers. Two copies of the Foster Carer Agreement, one of which must be signed and returned to AFA are sent to the carer. A copy of the Foster Carer Agreement needs to be signed annually at the time of the carer's review.

### **Representations/Independent Review Mechanism**

If the Decision Maker decides not to approve, this should be conveyed using the same process as above but, in addition, information should be included giving the options for appealing, in respect of the decision or the assessment process.

The applicant will be advised that if he or she wishes to challenge the decision, they have the right to submit a written representation to the Fostering Panel within 28 days of receiving written notice. If written representations are made within that time the matter must be referred to the Panel for further consideration. The Panel will hear any representations and make a recommendation. The Panel may uphold its original recommendation or make a different recommendation because 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 supporting evidence will be sent to the applicant within 7 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 (IRM). An application must be made in writing within 28 days of receiving that the applicants have not been approved.

If the applicant decides to refer the matter to the Independent Review Mechanism, the Panel reports, and any new information obtained since the Panel meeting, a record of the ADM's decision with supporting reasons and a copy of the written notification of the decision must be

sent to the Independent Review body within 10 working days of their written request for information.

The Independent Review is carried out by BAAF on behalf of the Secretary of State and the applicant and two representatives of the Fostering Agency will be invited to attend. 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 the Decision Maker making a final recommendation.

The circumstances in which the carer will not have a right to a review by the IRM are if she/he are disqualified as a result of a conviction or caution for a specified offence relating to safeguarding. If no written notification of a request to appeal is received, the Decision Maker's decision not to approve the applicant/s is confirmed.

### **Transfer of Foster Carers protocol England (2014)**

The Fostering Network protocol outlines the restrictions that apply to the approval and resignation of carers who wish to move between a current and recruiting agency. This information is crucial, as it relates to the timeframe for applicants to submit a letter of resignation to the agency that holds their approval. A Foster Carer can only be approved by one fostering service at a time, and therefore the date of transferring approval to an alternative agency cannot be prior to the date that the carers' current approval ends. If a letter of resignation is sent to the recruiting service, it will come into effect 28 days after the carers' current agency receives the letter. (Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, Reg.28 (13)) At this stage the fostering service provider does not need to take any further action. It is not a legal requirement, but constitutes good practice, to inform members of both Panels that the process for transfer has been completed.

Further details relating to the timeframe for transfer are covered under 4.4 and 5.6 of the Transfer of Foster Carers Protocol England (2014) and can be summarised as follows:

'The decision maker of the recruiting service may state that they will approve the person as a Foster Carer on a specific date in the future, which could be planned to coincide with the termination of the existing approval and the expiry of the 28 days' notice. It should be made clear that in the meantime the Foster Carer is not approved by the new provider. Alternatively, the decision maker may delay their decision until the date the carers existing approval is terminated. This may not conform to the detail of the Fostering Services Minimum Standards 14.9 regarding timescales but still achieves the desired outcome that the 'fostering panel and decision maker make timely quality and appropriate recommendations/decision in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of a children in foster care.'

### **After Approval**

Where an application is approved, the Foster Carer will be allocated a Placement Manager and they will be the primary point of contact between AFA and the newly approved carer.

### **Foster Carer Agreement**

The Agreement will be kept on the Foster Carers electronic and paper file, together with the Form F report and supporting documents. Newly approved carers will be given a copy of the Foster Carer's Handbook, which covers policies, procedures, guidance, legal information, and guidance on allowances. Carers will need to give the Placement Manager details of their bank account so that, as and when a child is placed. The Foster Carer's Agreement will need to be signed at the time of approval and following annual reviews.

## Carer profiles

During the assessment process, applicants will be asked for information and photographs to complete a family profile. The profile should use visual and written information to introduce members of the foster family, the foster home, any pets, and information about the activities the foster family enjoy. A more detailed profile for placing Social Workers is also needed.

In addition, further information such as any special skills or experience the carer may have, will be given to Local Authorities when a potential match is being considered. This information will be used to identify the suitability of the placement to meet the needs of specific children and it will be sent to referring Social Workers when a Foster Carer(s) has been identified as a potential match.

## Connected Policies, Guidance and Information

<b>Name of Policy/Guidance</b>	<b>Relevant for</b>
Expectations of Foster Carers Behaviour	Foster 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
AFA guidance for fostering assessments C-19	Staff and applicants
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)	Applicants

Updated October 2020