



# Assessing Prospective Foster Parents

(England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

## *Fostering Services*

Our objective is to provide high quality, safe and child focussed foster placements for children according to local need.

This procedure sets out how our Polaris community of fostering agencies enacts the regulatory framework for the assessment of foster parents in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland to meet the above objective.

This procedure forms part of the Polaris Quality Management system ISO 9001.

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	Health & Safety Procedure	
	Risk Assessment & Safer Caring Procedure	
	DBS Procedure	
	Safer Sleeping Procedure	

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## Procedure Details

Our marketing approach and analysis of need enables us to target recruitment activity to meet a wide and comprehensive range of needs of children for which we aim to attract and recruit a diverse range of Foster Parents. We are very happy to assess applicants with a diverse range of social characteristics and who live in a range of diverse social circumstances so that we have foster parents to represent a broad range of the community and meet the full range of needs of children within the community. However, for any application in which a couple are living together as partners or living apart but with both planning to provide care to a 'looked after' child we will always assess this as a joint application in which both partners must be assessed as suitable to become foster parents.

We will assess those applicants that have a realistic chance of becoming foster parents and meeting that need. On occasion, we may not be able to accept an application, but we will always talk this through with applicants when we do not accept an application form and will confirm that in writing.

Foster parenting is a professional role to nurture and support children who are in public care to achieve the best possible life outcomes. Fostering is a critical role, which allows individuals to care for other people's children in their own home full time, and therefore the process must be robust in its scrutiny of those people wishing to provide care for children. No one has the right to be a foster parent, and not everyone has the aptitude or capacity to provide foster care in their home. Therefore, the assessment of prospective foster parents is a process, which affords the opportunity to consider all the evidence available in a fair and transparent manner, to make a decision as to whether or not the fostering household is suitable to provide safe nurturing care to 'looked after' children.

It is important to see foster parent recruitment and assessment alongside foster parent retention and to see the stability of the placements of children as integrated measurable processes. These processes are underpinned by thorough preparation, training and good support and supervision to ensure a robust, efficient and child centred team of foster parents. It is by ensuring that foster parents are encouraged and supported throughout their fostering journey, from making an enquiry through to assessment and hopefully many years of fostering that the best support will be provided to the children who need a loving fostering family to care for them.

## Integrated working within Assessment



Decision making within assessment sits with the Assessment Manager (equivalent in ISP). However, there is an active role for operational teams that includes delivery of pre-approval training and providing brief feedback to the Assessing Social Worker/Assessment Manager. To further support new foster parents as they transition from assessment and adjust to the fostering role all agencies should link applicants to a current foster parent following the initial consultation between the Assessing Social Worker and the Assessment Manager. It is also important that after the pre-panel consultation between the Assessing Social Worker and the Assessment Manager and before panel that a supervising social worker is identified and makes contact with the applicant(s) and that the referrals team makes contact with the applicant(s).

### The Enquiry Process

The group of agencies within the Polaris community aims to ensure that all enquirers are provided with a friendly, courteous and efficient service by specialist staff who are trained in the role of recruiting Foster Parents. Management oversight of the recruitment service is robust to ensure that all enquiries are treated fairly and in a timely manner.

Enquiries go to an enquiry team, where experienced and trained Enquiry Officers (EO) respond to them. Enquiries are made to the team through several different routes. These include directly from the appropriate agency website, phone calls, emails and a live web

chat facility. The enquirer will go through an initial screening process to establish whether a further and more detailed discussion or visit would be appropriate. If at any point, the service decides that it is not able to progress with an enquiry the enquirer will be advised of the reasons.

Should the Enquiry Officer (EO) and enquirer determine that they would both like to proceed, then the EO will pass the details to a Recruitment Officer (RO) or a staff member from the appropriate agency local region who will then book a home visit. This visit is arranged at a time to suit the enquirer and other members of the family who need to be present. The meeting is confirmed to the enquirer via email/letter.

In many cases the initial home visit will be completed at the enquirer's home that is intended to be used for fostering. There is an option for this to be done using a video format or in some circumstances over the telephone. A visit in the home or a visit by a mobile video format allows the agency representative to see the family in their own environment, view the property, the make-up of the home and take in to consideration any health and safety requirements that may need to be addressed.

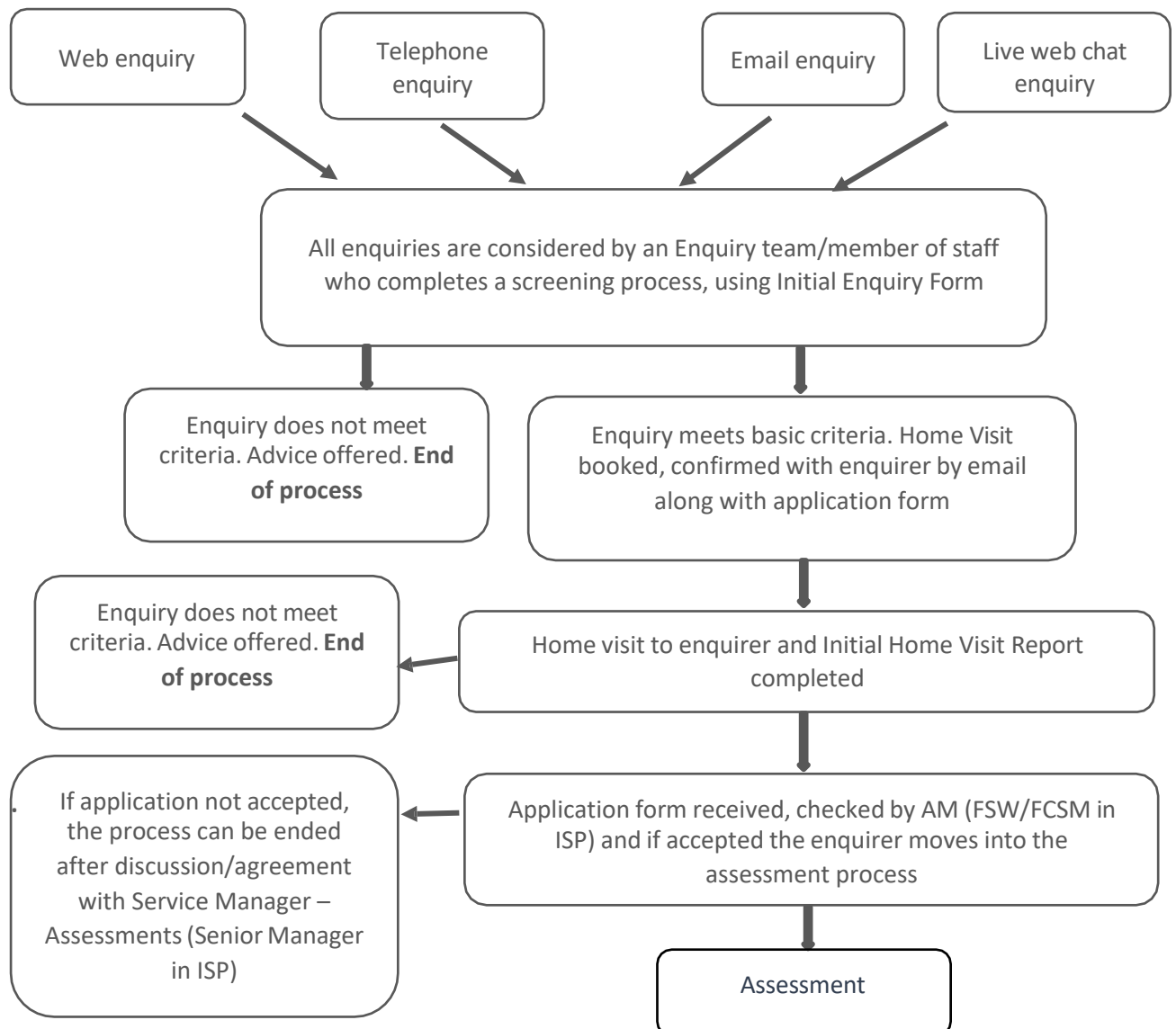
The initial home visit will enable the enquirer to discuss fostering for the agency and the application, assessment, training, and panel and approval process. Following the visit an 'Initial Home Visit Report' will be completed which will include any recommendations around the viability of an assessment and give an early indication of key areas of focus. If the RO/local staff member considers, following the visit considers that the enquirer is suitable to proceed into assessment they will ask the enquirer to complete the application form. Once an application form is received by the agency and an Initial Home Visit report has been completed these documents are passed to an Assessment Manager (FCSM/FSW in ISP). They then consider the application form and Home Visit Report, seek clarification or further information where needed and then make a decision to accept the application or otherwise.

This decision should be taken without delay and within 7 days if further information is required to inform the decision.

If the decision is taken to accept an application, the decision must be made (in England and Wales) to conduct the assessment with Stage 1 and 2 running concurrently or to begin Stage 1 of the assessment first.

N.B. In Northern Ireland Stage 1 and Stage 2 do not apply, therefore the concurrent process will always be used.

## Enquiry through to Application Stage - FLOWCHART



## The Assessment Process

### Application form received and accepted

In England NMS 14.4 requires that the agency fostering panel make its recommendation on suitability to foster within “8 months of receipt of the prospective Foster parent(s) application to be assessed”. Northern Ireland and Wales work to the same timescales.

All information relating to the applicant and third parties obtained throughout the recruitment and assessment process is handled, processed and stored in line with GDPR principles and in compliance with the agency Data Protection Policy.

Assessments are undertaken by qualified and suitably experienced social workers.<sup>1</sup> These are often independent social workers (referred to as Independent Assessing Social Workers – ‘ASWs’) contracted to undertake individual assessments on a self-employed basis. Each independent ASW must have their own Self-Employed file, which contains all documentation obtained as part of the safer recruitment process and ongoing practice monitoring and development. Human Resources are responsible for the update and review of the self-employed contractor contracts and ensuring continued compliance with necessary checks and registrations.

Assessment Managers (AMs) (FSW/FCSM in ISP) are responsible for the shortlisting, interview, induction and management of ASWs. They provide structured consultative guidance and support to the ASWs and quality assure their work. Applicants and their ASW's, AMs and Recruitment Support Officers who provide end to end administrative support to each assessment (Local Administrators in ISP) – are required to sign an assessment agreement for each assessment, the terms of which they agree to adhere to throughout the duration of the assessment. (Note: Where AM and RSO are referred to in the remainder of this policy please read as FSW/FCSM and Local Administrator for ISP).

### Front Loaded Assessments

The model for a ‘Front Loaded Assessment’ is of using a full initial home visit report to inform the key identified assessment activity as: **Potential Contra-indicators / Issues to address early in assessment / Issues particular to an assessment/ Standard issues to cover in all assessments.**

Progress is reviewed within a mid-point review meeting between the Assessing Social Worker and the Assessment Manager and a subsequent pre-panel consultation (ISP does not have a formal pre-panel consultation), review/consultation then feeding into the Form F report.

Allocation and Review/Consultation processes are written up by the Assessment Manager and shared with / made available to the ASW, RSO and an Operational Team Agency Assessment Lead. This may be the Registered Manager unless the Registered Manager is the Agency Decision Maker or it may be another nominated manager from the operational team. The purpose of sharing the key Allocation and Consultation documents with Agency Assessment Leads is to ensure excellent communication between the centralised assessment service and the Operational Agency and Regional social work team in respect of the progress of each application.

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<sup>1</sup> This means a qualified social worker with previous or relevant experience to the recruiting and assessing of Foster Parents. There may be occasions where newly qualified social workers and student social workers undertake assessments. This must always be under the supervision and guidance of a suitably experienced social worker

The assessment thread from Home Visit through to report is as follows:

## Home Visit → Allocation → Consultations → Report

### Structure of Assessments

The assessment structure in **England and Wales** is made up of two parts, firstly through a range of verifiable checks and secondly through a home study assessment.

In **Northern Ireland** there is not a 2 Stage process but as both stages are usually conducted concurrently in England and Wales, the fundamentals of the assessment process (other than for the termination of an assessment under Stage 1 criteria) are not significantly different. The checks are led by statutory guidance and good practice from a range of verifiable sources: police, education, employment, health, local authority/trust and include personal references and household safety. Checks including criminal record checks will also be conducted on all Adult Household Members.

### Assessing Foster Parents – Decision made to run stages 1 and 2 concurrently (England and Wales only)

- Regulations in **England and Wales** allow Stage 1 and 2 to be commenced at the same time, and this is usually what the Polaris community of fostering agencies will do unless there are specific reasons to seek Stage 1 checks or a particular Stage 1 check prior to commencing Stage 2.
- In **Northern Ireland**, separate stages to the assessment process do not apply and therefore in effect this 'concurrent' process will always apply.
- Stage 1 checks in England and Wales are:
  - the applicant's full name, address and date of birth;
  - details of the applicant's health, supported by a medical report;
  - particulars of other adult household members;
  - particulars of children in the applicant's family (whether or not they are members of the household) and any other children in the household;
  - particulars of the household's accommodation;
  - the outcome of any request or application made by the applicant, or any member of the applicant's household, to foster or adopt children or for registration as an early or later years provider under Part 3 of the Childcare Act 2006, including particulars of any previous approval or refusal of approval;
  - the name and address of any fostering service that the applicant has been an approved foster parent for in the preceding 12 months;
  - names and addresses of two persons who will provide personal references for the applicant;



- in relation to the applicant and each member of their household aged 18 or over, an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service Certificate (DBS/Access NI);
- details of any current and any previous marriage, civil partnership or similar relationship.
- consult the local authority/trust in whose area the applicant lives, if this is different to the fostering service
- interview at least two personal referees and prepare written reports of the interviews; or, if the person has been an approved foster parent for another fostering service in the preceding twelve months, request a written reference from that fostering service. If an applicant has been a foster parent in the previous 12 months, and a written reference from their previous fostering service is obtained, there is no requirement to also interview personal referees. However, the fostering service can seek verbal and/or written references from personal referees, in addition to the fostering service's reference, if they choose to do so. If the previous fostering service does not provide a reference, for whatever reason, interviews with two personal referees must be conducted.

### Assessing Foster Parents – stages 1 and 2 concurrently – FLOWCHART (England & Wales)

#### The AM

- Confirms decision to begin assessment at Stage 1 & 2 (**England and Wales**)
- Completes **Assignment Confirmation Note (commissioning document in ISP)** setting out areas of key early focus for ASW
- Sets dates for **Initial/pre-panel consultations, FF submission and panel**
- Allocates ASW setting out terms for assessment
- Copies Agency / Regional Assessment lead into allocation communication (in ISP the Fostering Administrator / Fostering Social Worker copies documents to the RM or FCSM).

RSO generates forms and letters as required and updates system  
Commences Checks process and books Applicant onto the assessment preparation training  
Sends 'Next Steps' foster parent preparation materials to applicant and to ASW

AM and RSO regularly review status of all checks and agree additional actions, including supplementary checks, as required

RSO updates system, uploads copies of checks (if required) upon receipt and advises AM of checks received.

ASW, AM and ADM decide that information disclosed via Stage 1 checks indicates the Applicant is not suitable and the assessment should not proceed  
**(England & Wales only)**

Within 10 working days of receipt of final 'statutory' check letter from ADM is sent to applicants advising that Stage 1 of the assessment process has been completed satisfactorily **(England & Wales only)**

ADM informs Applicant in writing of decision not to proceed, this must be within 10 working days of receipt of the last Stage 1 check. Include information about complaints process.  
**(England & Wales only)**

AM and ASW communicate through structured mid-point review and pre-panel consultation (no pre-panel consultation in ISP) but within other regular discussions as appropriate about progress of assessment and content of checks.  
ASW alerts AM to any significant issues identified during their assessment at the earliest opportunity

Initial and pre-panel consultations documented by AM and uploaded to Applicant record. (Other than in ISP these records are shared with regional assessment leads to ensure good communication and planning to support new foster parents)

Concerns about the Applicant's suitability arise and decision made that the assessment should not continue

ASW is able to make a positive recommendation regarding an applicant's suitability to foster.  
Full assessment is completed

**For all applications in England and Wales whereby an ADM decision has not been confirmed within 10 working days of the receipt of the last 'statutory check' or is not based on Stage 1 information**

Applicants must be notified of the concerns and informed of their options. Unless applicants formally withdraw from the assessment A 'Brief Report' or a full report will be written by the ASW and presented to the fostering panel. Note that in Northern Ireland there is no Stage 1 process and no defined timescale though applicants should be informed that the assessment has been ended by ADM without undue delay.

ASW submits completed Form F Assessment and all accompanying documentation by the agreed deadline

AM quality assures the Form F Assessment report.

If AM identifies the assessment (or associated documentation) requires further input they will notify the ASW and only if necessary set timescales for submission of that information.



## Assessing Foster Parents – Decision made to run Stage 1 and Stage 2 Consecutively

### (England and Wales only)

In **England** and **Wales** the decision to proceed with Stage 1 before Stage 2 occurs where the agency considers it is prudent to see the return of a Stage 1 check prior to commencing a Stage 2 assessment, for example where there is a significant chance that a Stage 1 check may in the view of the AM prevent an Applicant from fostering. The process above would remain the same; however, the allocation of the ASW and start of home study would not usually be undertaken until the agency decides to move to Stage 2. This should be once the check(s) that is causing potential concern is returned rather than once all Stage 1 checks are returned and satisfied. It is important to remember that the 8-month regulatory requirement begins from the time of the application being received.

## Home Study Assessment/Form F Assessment

Home Study Assessment in England, Northern Ireland and Wales (Stage 2 in England and Wales). When undertaking the home study assessment and in preparing applicants for the fostering role, the Assessing Social Worker will consider the following key areas:

- Safeguarding children’s physical, mental and emotional welfare
- Protecting and keeping children safe from harm in relation to absences / missing from placement and self-protection skills and awareness of child exploitation in all its forms including child sexual exploitation (CSE) and all forms of criminal exploitation.
- Providing a high-quality standard of care
- Providing a safe, healthy and nurturing environment
- Having a child-centered approach
- Recognising and addressing children’s needs in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality
- Promoting children’s health and educational achievement, self-esteem and self-awareness
- Providing stability in the lives of children to enable them to achieve their full potential
- Working closely with children’s family and encouraging contact with family and friends (where appropriate)
- Providing support and guidance, including coaching in general life skills, to young people preparing to leave care
- Working as part of a team of professionals
- Participating in learning and development (including completion of TSD standards as appropriate) and taking up opportunities for continued personal and professional development
- Engaging in peer support and support groups
- Full engagement in group social events with the focus on improving the quality of life for children
- Achieving positive outcomes for children, including encouraging them to recognise and take advantage of opportunities

### **Within the assessment process, Applicants are required to:**

- Actively participate in the assessment process and preparation of the assessment report
- Provide support to follow up ‘checks’ if issues arise e.g. providing alternative contact details for referees
- Attend and fully engage in Pre-Approval Preparation and Assessment Training
- Work closely with the ASW throughout the assessment including with use of each agency’s Next Steps to Foster electronic guide and associated worksheet, focusing on

key issues relevant to the fostering role. This is to ensure that all foster parents who are recruited are appropriately prepared to work with support and meet the challenges of the role.

- Read the non-confidential sections of the assessment report prior to presentation to the Fostering Panel, add any information or clarification they feel would be helpful and add their signature(s) to confirm their approval. Note: applicants will not be able to see documentation from third party sources where consent from the information providers has not been given.

Note that an applicant may seek access to their file at any time through a Subject Access Request (SAR) but this is unlikely to lead to information provided in confidence by third party sources being released to them without the agreement of the relevant third party source(s).

Applicants are invited to attend and be heard at the Fostering Panel in person accompanied by their ASW and by a supporter if they so wish. The purpose of panel is to clarify any issues raised by the assessment report and for Fostering Panel members to satisfy themselves that the Agency's standards have been met.

Applicants must be fully informed about all aspects and requirements of the assessment processes from the outset within an introductory letter from an Agency Decision Maker. Applicants are fully supported to meet those requirements if they are able to do so throughout the duration of their assessment, by both their ASW and the AM.

All assessments should be completed and presented to the Fostering Panel within the date specified on the Assignment Confirmation Note (Commissioning letter in ISP). It is important that assessments are allocated to an ASW without delay. Regulations stipulate that assessments must be completed within 8 months; this period is measured from the point an application is received to the fostering panel making a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) in respect of the suitability of the applicant to be approved as a foster parent by the agency. In exceptional circumstances if the 8-month timescale has not been achieved the reasons must be recorded within the assessment report and within the panel minutes.

The AM will oversee the progress of the assessment with the ASW. The 'mid-point' review consultation meeting and pre-panel consultation between the AM and ASW will examine the evidence and analysis gathered to date and agree further enquiries or assessment activities required to ensure the final report covers any 'new' information received during the assessment process. Communication and review should continue throughout the assessment with ongoing discussion as necessary in addition to the process of structured consultation. (*Note that ISP does not have a formal pre-panel consultation*).

The assessment report will always contain the ASW's final recommendation regarding the Applicant's suitability to be a Foster Parent(s), the suggested terms of approval and support and learning and development needs. Applicants are provided with and asked to sign all non-confidential sections of the Form F assessment report.

If the Applicant provides any factual corrections or comments, then these must be reviewed by the AM and the ASW and any appropriate corrective action taken. Upon completion, a copy of the amended Form F assessment report is sent to the Applicant asking that they review and sign Section E where appropriate and return.

The AM has the final responsibility for the quality assurance of all assessments. AM's must ensure that all assessments are of the highest standard, compliant with the Fostering Services/looked after children Regulations, National Minimum Standards and Health & Social Care Standards as well as agency procedures and best practice requirements.

### Professional Development Plan (PDP)

The ASW will complete a Professional Development Plan (PDP) for each Applicant. This, alongside the Next Steps to Foster worksheet completed by applicants as a full and detailed preparatory tool used throughout the assessment identifies areas of strength, but also any gaps in learning and development and includes a plan as to how those gaps can be addressed by the Applicant and the agency during the first 12 months of approval.

Once approved, the Professional Development Plan will form the basis of supervision sessions between the Foster Parents and the SSW and will determine future learning and development needs.

The PDP will be regularly reviewed and updated by the SSW to reflect the Foster Parent's development and also be reviewed and updated as part of the annual Foster Parent review process.

### Pre-Approval Preparation and Assessment Training

A pre-approval preparation and assessment training course is provided for all Applicants. The primary focus is to prepare Applicants for fostering, and to ensure they receive crucial information that will enable them to understand the complex needs of many 'looked after' children arising from previous experiences and to explore strategies to work with support to meet those needs and provide a positive loving family home.

Applicants are observed throughout the course and course facilitators produce a short, written report upon completion that details observations on the Applicant's engagement, contribution, attitude and any concerns that may have arisen. ***The applicant(s) must be***

***made aware that they will be observed as part of this training and that a short report will be generated as a result. Applicants must be made aware verbally by the trainers of any significant issues that they will identify in their short report.*** This report is shared with the AM, ASW and the Applicant. The ASW considers the content of the short report in the context of the assessment and the report is also shared with the Fostering Panel.

The Applicant should attend the first available course they can as part of their assessment. Training frequency will meet local demands and no application should be delayed for a preparatory training course to be made available. If it is a joint application, then (unless the applicants are experienced foster parents in which case attendance may be desirable but discretionary) both applicants should attend the full course. There may be some circumstances in which an applicant can bring a supporter to the training e.g. a non-resident partner or an adult household member who will have regular contact with any child placed with the applicant. However, this should be discussed with the trainers in advance.

The preparatory training should be seen alongside the Next Steps preparation guide with applicant worksheet and together both will provide a strong focus on preparing the applicants throughout and alongside their assessment, to enable them to provide good stable placements for children when they are approved as foster parents.

Alongside the above training, within ISP applicants are also required to complete the following courses prior to attending panel:

WRAP (Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent)

Safeguarding Level 1

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

## Health and Safety Assessment

All Applicants require a robust and thorough assessment of their home, any garden and any vehicle to ensure that the home environment is safe from hazards, is gas safe and is suitable in all respects as a home for a 'looked after child' to live in.

The assessment will consider fire safety and will address any potential risk areas including being near to water, any firearms, any caravan/mobile home, small holding, Quad bike etc. This process ensures that any potential hazards are identified early and safety measures agreed between the Applicant and ASW.

The health and Safety Assessment and safer caring discussions should evidence that the home will provide a safe and appropriate environment for a 'looked after' child and that bedroom and sleeping arrangements are specific to the ages, and developmental stage of a child. A robust assessment of the applicant(s) will highlight their experience and skills to care for children of the range of ages and needs for which approval may be recommended. Where applicants may be approved to care for babies and young infants it is important that

the assessment will ensure that applicants understand and implement a safer sleeping environment for babies and infants in line with NHS guidance and Safer Sleeping procedures.

In line with the Health and Safety checklist and requirements within the foster parent agreement, applicants will be required to provide evidence of appropriate insurance cover for home, car, travel and third party liability.

### Permanent residences other than traditional houses

There may be on occasion assessments of applicants who do not reside in a traditional home; this would include boats, chalets or static caravans. Each situation must be considered on a case-by-case basis and it must be agreed jointly by the AM and the Registered Manager for the agency to proceed following an assessment of the circumstances. Areas for consideration include, but are not limited to:

- All must be static/permanently moored
- All must be habitable for 12 months a year (permanent)
- All must provide children with a bedroom and space which is adequate and suitable
- ASW must always be aware and open to potential of additional risk assessments required due to the particular nature of the property; for example, proximity to water, proximity to clubhouses, games rooms, etc.

### Household Safer Caring Plan

Safer caring practices are fully explored within the assessment process and during the preparatory training. Applicants must produce their first Household Safer Caring Plan during their assessment. It will be based on a template but should be personalised to the circumstances of each applicant household as appropriate. It should be produced in consultation with, and agreed by, all members of the household. The ASW will guide the Applicant and approve the plan.

The household safer caring plan should confirm that proposed bedroom and sleeping arrangements are appropriate for all children and that applicants who may care for young children understand safer sleeping expectations for babies and young infants.

### Support Persons (Friends Family Members Respite Carers (FFMRC) in ISP)

Each application should include a nominated support person who will be able to step in and provide support, offer a break as and when required and will be a nominated key person within the applicant's support network.



A professional assessment of a nominated support person should include all adult household members if a child will stay at the support person's home. The assessment, undertaken by the allocated Assessing Social Worker or if necessary another social worker is a valuable contribution to the overall assessment and to an understanding of the strength of the applicant's support network.

The Support Person Risk Assessment (or FFMRC in ISP) is to be approved and signed by the ASW and the AM.

### Welcome Booklet / Foster Parent Profile(s)

All Agencies have a form of Foster Parent Profile / Welcome Book, which is used to share with children who may be placed and to share with the LA/Trust. The ASW should introduce the purpose of these documents and support the Applicant to complete.

It is important that sufficient information be given to a child ahead of their placement with the Foster Parent(s). It is intended to provide some information about who lives in the household, their home, the bedroom available for the child, the location and any routines and activities they are involved in. It is hoped that this will support any introductions and allay some initial fears for the child. The Applicant should be encouraged to be creative and produce something warm, engaging and 'child friendly'.

### Permanence / Long Term – Evidence of Competence

If it has been fully explored during the assessment and the AM, ASW and Applicant are in agreement that the Applicant is suitable to provide care on a **Permanent / Long Term** basis then this should be evidenced within the body of the Form F report.

### Assessing approved or previously approved Foster Parents

There are differing scenarios that present themselves within fostering as applicants seek to join a new fostering agency that necessitate a (new) fostering assessment being undertaken of Applicants who are currently or have previously been approved as Foster Parents:

- Applicant who has been an approved Foster Parent (with one of our agencies or another agency) during last 12 months
- Applicant who has been an approved Foster Parent (our agency or other agency) but more than 12 months ago

The matrix below sets out the checks, references and requirements to be undertaken in such situations.

<b>Checks, references, requirements</b>	<b>Applicant who has been an approved Foster Parent during last 12 months Inc. fostering currently for a different agency within the Group.</b>	<b>Applicant who has been an approved Foster Parent but more than 12 months ago</b>
<b>DBS / Access NI</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Medicals</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Current Fostering agency reference</b>	Yes	N/A
<b>Previous fostering / adoption /Child minding reference</b>	Yes – unless previous check available from file and no changes	Yes – unless previous check available from file and no changes
<b>Overseas check</b>	Yes – unless previous check available from file and no changes	Yes – unless previous check available from file and no changes
<b>LA residency</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Publicly Accessible Internet check</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Ex-partner reference</b>	Yes – unless previous check available from file and no changes	Yes – unless previous check available from file and no changes
<b>2 personal references</b>	No – if reference provided by current or recent fostering agency but contact to ask if anything new they wish to share and there is discretion to interview if necessary	Yes
<b>Family reference</b>	No – if reference provided by current or recent fostering agency but contact to ask if anything new they wish to share	Yes
<b>Education reference</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Current employer</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Previous employer (working with children or vulnerable adults)</b>	No – if reference provided by current or recent fostering agency	Yes – unless previous check available from file
<b>Landlord consent</b>	Yes	Yes

Checks, references, requirements	Applicant who has been an approved Foster Parent during last 12 months Inc. fostering currently for a different agency within the Group.	Applicant who has been an approved Foster Parent but more than 12 months ago
Finance check	Yes	Yes
Armed Forces (as required)	Yes – unless previous check available from file and no changes	Yes – unless previous check available from file and no changes
Preparatory training attendance Workbook Feedback report	Discretionary	Discretionary
FC TSDS Portfolio	No if already completed and signed to evidence – otherwise complete within first year following approval	No if already completed and signed to evidence – otherwise complete within first year following approval
PDP	Yes	Yes
Household Safer Caring Plan	Yes	Yes
Health and Safety HH assessment	Yes	Yes
Pets Assessment	Yes	Yes
Support person risk assessment/ FFMRC accreditation form	Yes	Yes
Welcome booklet	Yes	Yes
Foster Parent Profile	Yes	Yes

### Re-Assessment of existing Foster Parents with a change of Registration

- Any assessment of an Applicant seeking to transfer between one of our agencies or from another agency will be managed via the assessment team. However, moves between registrations within the same agency will be managed internally by that agency.
- If the applicants are currently fostering or have been registered as foster parents within the last 12 months, then if the current or recent fostering agency provides a written reference there is no requirement to either obtain written references from nor to interview personal referees, though a decision may be taken to do so.

## Protocol of Movement of Foster Parents between Fostering Agencies

Approved Foster Parents have the freedom to apply to change the fostering agency that holds their approval if they so wish. [The Transfer of Foster Carers Protocol](#) was created to lay out 'good practice' guidelines that should be followed when a Foster Parent wishes to transfer between agencies. This was developed in a partnership between The Fostering Network and the joint forum of independent fostering providers, with the support of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. The Polaris fostering agencies have adopted the protocol as best practice.

The protocol outlines different procedures for the transfer of Foster Parents between agencies depending on whether there are children in placement.

## Documentation, Forms and Stages of the Enquiry and Assessment

### Process – OVERVIEW

Specific stages of process	Responsibility	Notes
<b>1. Initial Enquiry</b>	EO	All enquiries to be directed to the enquiry team. If screening is positive for a home visit the EO then sends the details to the Local Region and explains that the local region will be in touch to book visit in some instances the visit can be conducted by a member of the central team.
<b>2. Home Visit Booking</b>	Region/Local Office	A central team member or member of local region allocates staff member to complete a home visit and confirms with enquirer by email.
<b>3. Home Visit</b>	Region/Local Office	If home visit is positive, an application is invited from the enquirer. The person undertaking the visit uploads the report to Charms and application is then passed to AM (FSW FCSM in ISP).
<b>4. Welcome letter and allocation</b>	RSO	Welcome Letter sent to applicant
	AM	Takes a decision whether to accept the application and if it is accepted at Stage 1 and 2 or initially at Stage 1 only (England and Wales).
	AM	When the Home Study begins, (Assessment is accepted at Stage 2 England and Wales) the AM (FSW/FCSM in ISP) selects an ASW to undertake the Home Study.

Specific stages of process	Responsibility	Notes
	AM or FSW/FCSM	Completes Assignment Confirmation Note (Commissioning letter in ISP) to set out terms of assessment and highlights areas of focus within assessment as: potential contra-indicators, Issues for Early focus and any other issues pertaining to the assessment. This sets out the Mid-Point Review date (see ISP process below), pre-panel consultation date, report submission date and planned panel date and is copied to RSO and the operational assessment lead. In ISP- FSW will arrange the Mid-Point Review date with the ASW and do not have a pre panel consultation.
	RSO	Assessment agreement is signed by the Applicant, ASW, RSO and AM (FCSM/FSW in ISP)
	ADM/ FSW	ADM (Fostering administrator or Centre Administrator in ISP) sets out the content and expectation of the assessment for the applicant.
	RSO	The Applicant is sent Next Steps guide which will be the primary focus of preparing the applicant for the fostering role and will be used by the applicant and the ASW throughout the assessment.
<b>Assessment Begins (see separate table below of checks/references)</b>		
<b>5. Outcome of Stage 1 Assessment (England and Wales only)</b>	AM and ADM	Upon completion of Stage 1 (or when the AM and ADM considers there is sufficient information to continue with or proceed to Stage 2) the ADM must confirm that decision in writing for the applicant. (England and Wales).
	ADM	If the ADM takes the decision to terminate the assessment under Stage 1 criteria, he/she must write to the Applicant within 10 days of receipt of <b>all</b> Stage 1 checks to confirm giving reasons for that decision while taking account of data protection responsibilities to any third-party sources who have provided information in confidence. (England and Wales).

Specific stages of process	Responsibility	Notes
<b>6. Ending the Assessment (Non Stage 1 ends of Assessment in England and Wales)</b>	ASW	<p>If the Applicant is considered to be unsuitable to foster due to information obtained within Stage 2 of the assessment (or more than 10 days have elapsed since the return of the final Stage 1 check) then the Applicant must be informed of the reasons and advised that a Brief Report or a full report will be compiled and scheduled for consideration at the Fostering Panel.</p> <p>The Brief report (or full report) will be written by the ASW and submitted for 'approval' by the AM. The regional team (ASW in ISP) would schedule the brief report (or full report) for presentation at a Fostering Panel meeting.</p>
	RSO	<p>RSO sends the brief report (or full report) along with a covering letter to the Applicant asking for them to review, provide any comments and sign and return with a deadline of 10 days for return. The letter also acts as a formal invitation to the Fostering Panel meeting</p> <p>If the Applicant raises any issues with the accuracy of factual content of the report or is unwilling to sign, then this will be managed by the AM.</p>
<b>Ending the Assessment (Northern Ireland)</b>	ADM	<p>Applicant is informed verbally with subsequent confirmation from an ADM that the assessment is unable to proceed towards a positive outcome with reasons given.</p>
<b>7. Quality assurance of Form F</b>	AM (FSW/FCSM in ISP)	<p>Quality assurance of Form F must be completed within 2 weeks of receipt of documentation. If documentation is not completed to the required standard, then feedback and consultation is provided to the ASW. Corrective action and any unavoidable variation of timescales must be agreed and any change to Panel date is agreed.</p> <p>Any change to the planned panel date is communicated verbally to the Applicant by the RSO/ASW in ISP. Corrective action is completed as required and documentation resubmitted the ASW and RSO are informed.</p>

Specific stages of process	Responsibility	Notes
<b>8. Health and Safety Assessments</b>	ASW	All Health and Safety assessments to be completed by ASW during Form-F assessment.
<b>9. Training and Development for Applicant</b>	ASW	Set out in PDP/Form F in ISP
<b>10. Welcome booklet / Profile(S)</b>	Applicant /ASW	To be prepared by applicants with Assessing Social Worker
<b>11. Applicant Form F Agreement</b>	Applicant / RSO / AM(FSW/FCSM/Admin in ISP)	The final version (minus confidential sections) of the Form F report must be made available to the Applicant for review and comment. Comments should be provided, and the Section E signed. If any corrections are required, then these should be reviewed by the AM (FSW in ISP) and if unavoidable a new deadline for completion and return set
<b>12. Applicant Withdrawal from Assessment</b>	Applicant / AM (FSW/FCSM in ISP)	An applicant can withdraw from the assessment at any point. They should be asked to provide their decision in writing (letter or email). If an applicant becomes non-contactable, communication may be sent asking if they wish to continue with their assessment confirming that if, no response is received within 7 days the assessment will be ended.

## Checks & References

<b>Checks – a) DBS/ Access NI</b>	RSO Fostering Administrator/ Local Admin	(Applicant and all adult household members - HHM) Enhanced level DBS/ Access NI checks (included related government listings of persons unsuitable to work with children, known as the 'barred list') on all members of the household aged 18 years plus
	RSO /Fostering Admin / Local Admin	Criminal record checks are undertaken on every household member over age 18.



	ASW / AM	(Applicant and HHM) Where a criminal offence is shown on the DBS check then a DBS Risk Assessment must be completed (usually by the ASW), endorsed by the AM, and authorised by Service Manager - Assessments.
	RSO /Local Admin	Overseas checks (equivalent to DBS) for Applicant who have lived abroad for a significant period of time as adults. See guidance below.
<b>Checks – b) Medical</b>	RSO (Admin in ISP)	Letter sent to Applicant enclosing the CoramBAAF Form AH asking them to make an appointment with their GP for a medical, applicant takes AH form, forwarding letter with SAE to the GP at the appointment, and once completed is then returned to RSO. CoramBAAF Form AH is sent to the Agency Medical Advisor for their comments about the Applicant's suitability to foster. These comments are reviewed by the ASW and AM/FSW/FCSM and noted verbatim in the Form F Assessment report
<b>Checks – c) Local Authority/Trust</b>	RSO (Admin in ISP)	Checks with Local Authorities (client and child protection records) in whose area(s) the Applicant and any other adult household members live / have lived within the last 10 years.
<b>Checks – d) Ofsted/CIW/CIS</b>	RSO (Admin in ISP)	Should be completed for Applicant and HH members
<b>Checks – e) Finance</b>	ASW (Form F)	Finance check to be completed.
<b>Checks – f) School/Nursery/Health Visitor</b>	RSO (Local Admin in ISP)	Enquiries about Applicant's own children unless an existing carer with a Looked After Child that is transferring then School checks for Looked After Children may also be appropriate.
<b>Checks – g) Landlord</b>	RSO (Local Admin in ISP)	**Please note there is a requirement when conducting a Landlord Check for a Property in Wales to also complete a Landlord Registration Check. <a href="http://www.rentsmart.gov.wales/en/landlord">www.rentsmart.gov.wales/en/landlord</a> The details should then be uploaded alongside the response from the Landlord. There may be exceptions to this situation referred to on the website. It will be the responsibility of the Assessment Manager to make a decision on these.

<b>Checks – h) Armed Forces Checks</b>	RSO(Local Admin in ISP)	See guidance below re Armed Forces checks
<b>References – a) Personal references</b>	RSO (Local Admin in ISP)	Minimum of two personal referees, who will also be interviewed using Personal Referee Interview Template.
<b>References – b) Family references</b>	RSO (Local Admin in ISP)	Form for Adult Child of Applicants Interview Template' should be used for interviewing adult birth children of applicants.
<b>References - c) Employer references</b>	RSO (Local Admin in ISP)	<p>Previous employer references sought for applicant's employment (paid or unpaid) involving any children or vulnerable adults. The Assessment Manager may use discretion to form a view as to when reasonable efforts have been made to obtain historical checks taking into account all other sources of information available within the assessment to consider whether sufficient evidence is available to inform a view as to the suitability of the applicant to foster.</p> <p>Employer checks for current employment (unless short term of employment with current employer then previous employer may also be contacted). NB: If Applicant has fostered children during the previous 12 months, and the agency is satisfied with the references that were sought by the other agency, then new personal references and references from previous partners or past employers need not be sought though there is discretion to do so.</p>
<b>References – d) Former Partner References</b>	RSO (Local Admin in ISP)	<p>Guidance about interviewing former partners is included in Form F template. See also guidance below.</p> <p>NB: If Applicant has fostered children during the previous 12 months, and the agency is satisfied with the references that were sought by the other agency, then new references from previous partners need not be sought though there is discretion to do so.</p>
<b>References – e) Current or Previous Fostering Agency and/or Adoption Agency</b>	RSO (Local Admin in ISP)	<p>Reference from any previous fostering agency (this may include having access to the information that the agency have on file about the Applicant).</p> <p>If currently fostering, a protocol meeting will to be arranged if there are children in placement.</p>

## Employment and Voluntary Work Checks within Assessment

An employer check will be sought in respect of each applicant's current employer and all substantive employers within the most recent 2 years.

Checks will be sought in respect of all substantive paid or unpaid work with children or with vulnerable adults undertaken from the age of 18 years. This would not ordinarily include babysitting or very informal tasks but would be likely to include voluntary work such as sports coaching or Au Pair work.

It is recognised that some checks will be difficult to obtain and may be seen as less critical than others when taken in the context of all information available within the assessment and the Assessment Manager will have discretion to determine the appropriateness of repeated chases for checks that are seen as less critical to informing the recommendation when taken in the broader context of available information. The Form F assessment report should reference this decision making where appropriate.

## Former Partner Referee Interviews

Whilst there is no specific regulatory requirement to interview former partners of Applicants, there is a specific requirement that enquiries will be made and information sought about previous marriages and partnerships and that all available relevant information must be taken into account in the assessment of an Applicant's suitability. As such, it is considered best practice to seek to interview 'significant' ex-partners wherever possible, with the consent of the Applicant. Examples of when this may be appropriate include where the former relationship(s) included parenting or child-care responsibilities. Even where there are no children of the former relationship(s), any concerns about safety or a history of violence must be looked into carefully.

Written references will be requested from former partners and usually followed up by either a face-to-face or a telephone interview by the ASW using a specific template. The AM will use their discretion to establish which former partners should be contacted though former partners with whom an applicant has lived with or has had children with are likely to be regarded as significant. Where it is considered inappropriate to contact a significant former partner e.g. the relationship may have been characterised by domestic abuse or to contact the former partner may cause distress particularly to a child or may de-stabilise the family, the ASW and AM ensure that the relevant detail is recorded in the Form F.

In cases where the Applicant advises that their former partner is untraceable, the ASW and AM will need to demonstrate and record in the Form F that reasonable steps have been undertaken to contact a significant former partner. Where finding a former partner has not been possible or a decision has been taken that it would be inappropriate to contact a particular former partner, then the assessor should expect to interview people who knew

the couple when they were together to obtain reliable third-party verification of an applicant's account of that relationship. The information should be considered alongside all other information pertaining to an applicant's suitability to foster and a judgement call made about whether sufficient evidence is available within the assessment as a whole for an application to appropriately proceed to recommendation.

The focus of the interview should be on demonstrating the likely ability of an applicant to care for a child safely and on the competence of the Applicant's parenting abilities given the demands they are likely to face from children placed.

Where there are children, the former partner's views in relation to the perceived impact of fostering on the child should be sought. Furthermore, the ASW should meet with/interview children from previous relationships where they stay overnight in what will be the fostering household - as they are already required to do for other "members of the household". In considering the input of former partners, every effort should be made to verify information, including an explanation of the relationship breakdown. The nature of the existing relationship between former partners should be considered when evaluating information received about the Applicant from this source.

### Adult Children Referee Interviews

Adult Birth Children are likely to be a particularly useful source of detailed information giving insight into the applicant's lifestyle and parenting abilities though they may have a limited point of reference. It is important that all reasonable efforts are made to interview all adult birth children and that should be done using a template to generate best quality information.

### Referees Confirming Accuracy of Interview Record

All referees, including Personal Referees, Family Referees, Adult Birth Children and Former Partners should be asked to sign confirmation of the content of their interviews. However, an application will not be delayed if a signature has not been received as long as the referee has clearly had the opportunity to comment / inform of any miss-understanding/ inaccuracy.

### Person on the Periphery (POP) Assessment

When there is a person integral to the dynamic of the household eg a non-resident partner of a fostering applicant who is not considered as a joint applicant or a partner of an adult child of the family who visits regularly within an established relationship it may be appropriate for a Person on the Periphery (POP) assessment of that person to be undertaken.

A POP assessment may also be undertaken of a lodger, a resident friend or family member (though not usually an adult child of the family) or another person who is integral to the household.

This is a discreet assessment and will include a DBS/ Access NI check, a Local Authority check and may include former partner checks as appropriate.

The Assessment Manager will set out the need for a POP assessment determining this to be proportionate to the involvement of the identified person within the household as a very regular visitor or adult household member.

The POP assessment will usually be undertaken by the Assessing Social Worker and will be considered by the Assessment Manager and by the Service Manager – Assessments.

Key information within the POP assessment will also feature within the Form F assessment report.

*ISP does not use the Person on the Periphery (POP) assessment.*

### Assessing Dogs and Pets

Assessments of dogs and pets will be undertaken by the Assessing Social Worker without automatic reference to a professional specialising in work with animals.

In households with 3 or more dogs an additional (3 plus dogs) form should be completed.

If the Assessing Social Worker / Assessment Manager believe that a professional view eg from a vet or from a dog behaviourist may be appropriate then such an assessment may be commissioned.

### Social Media / Internet checks

Social Media checks should follow the principle as guided by Coram Baaf 'Undertaking Checks and References in Fostering and Adoption Assessments' (2019) p96-102.

Key points as summarised within the above are that:

- I. 'A proportionate search could include putting the applicant's name into a reputable internet search engine and viewing any linked sites. It would be appropriate to search sites such as Facebook and YouTube in a similar way.'
- II. The information to be searched is that which is publicly available. 'It would ... not normally be appropriate to ask applicants to provide any passwords or access to any personal area of social networking website or similar site'.
- III. Internet checks should only be carried out in a spirit of openness, and with the full understanding of the person being assessed.

### Overseas Checks

Overseas checks (which may be a check with a police service of another country or may be a certificate of good conduct from a state embassy or other recognized state agency) are not

a statutory requirement of an assessment but may be appropriate in accounting for the good conduct of an applicant while outside of the UK.

As part of the assessment process, a check with an overseas authority will sometimes be sought. Such checks will normally be undertaken where:

- The applicant has lived abroad for more than a year in one main country and can provide an address for the purposes of the check;
- The period in question is within the last 10 years, and/or is of a relatively long duration compared with the time spent living in the UK;
- It is not possible to identify a sufficiently detailed and reliable employer reference from a recognized international company or organization for the period in question;
- The country in question has a sufficiently developed legal and administrative system to make it likely that a check might be considered valid and reliable.

In applying this, the agency will use some discretion, considering individual factors, including the quality of personal references that cover the period the person was living abroad and the emerging evidence in the assessment more widely.

The reasons for decisions about overseas checks will be recorded and made available within the assessment report.

## Smoking

Fostering applicants will be advised that they cannot be approved to care for children under the age of 5 years should any household member smoke cigarettes.

Fostering applicants will also be advised that for their own health and their role-modelling for young people then they will be well advised to make efforts to stop smoking.

Applicants who have ceased smoking prior to the start of the fostering assessments could be approved as 'non-smokers' but applicants who cease smoking during their assessment would not normally be approved to care for children under 5 years of age at initial approval.

*NB: ISP will retain an expectation that all foster parents have reported ceasing smoking for 12 months before they can be approved as a non-smoker and care for children under 5 years of age.*

## Armed Forces Checks

If an Applicant is currently, or has previously served, in the British Armed Forces then a statutory vetting check should be sought.

- The Armed Forces check should also be used if the Applicant is one of the following:
- A partner of someone currently serving with HM Forces
- The Partner of a civilian working overseas with HM Forces
- The Former partner of someone serving with HM Forces

- Ex-Service

Note: All sensitive data such as medicals, references and any associated documents relating to an assessment that uniquely identifies an individual prospective foster parent must be uploaded securely to the Charms system and the original should then be destroyed in line with GDPR guidelines. Original documents must not be stored, filed or retained in any way. Please refer to the Data Protection Policy for further guidance.

## References, Regulations, Legislation & Links

### The Legislative and Regulatory Framework – England

The assessment and approval of foster parents in England is set out in [The Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations \(2011\)](#) – Regulations 26 and 27, and the [Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards \(2011\)](#) - standards 13 and 14.

[The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2013](#) amended the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 to create a two-stage assessment process. Stage 1 of the Foster Parent assessment covers the checks specified in Schedule 3 of Fostering Regulations. If information emerges from Stage 1 checks to suggest an applicant is not suitable to become a foster parent, the assessment can be formally ended by an Agency Decision Maker (providing it is done within ten days of receipt of **all** the Stage 1 information).

Stage 2 of the foster parent assessment is the formal, detailed assessment (home study). Regulations allow Stage 1 and 2 to be commenced at the same time, and this is usually what the agency will do, unless there are specific reasons to seek Stage 1 checks prior to commencing Stage 2.

Further statutory guidance was issued by the Department of Education in July 2013 – [Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services](#).

The Regulations and Minimum Standards govern practice and set the standards against which the agency is inspected by Regulators (Ofsted).

### The Legislative and Regulatory Framework - Wales

The assessment and approval of foster parents in Wales is set out in [The Regulated Fostering Services \(Service Providers and Responsible Individuals\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2019](#) with accompanying Statutory Guidance and [The Fostering Panels \(Establishment and Functions\) \(Wales\) 2018](#) . Together, they form the basis of the new regulatory framework under the [Care Standards Act 2000](#) for the conduct of fostering services.

The above regulatory change in 2019 introduced a two-stage assessment process.

## The Legislative and Regulatory Framework – Northern Ireland

The assessment and approval of foster parents in Northern Ireland is set out in [The Foster Placement \(Children\) Regulations Northern Ireland 1996](#). Legislation in Northern Ireland does not facilitate a two-stage process to the assessment of foster parents, but given that practice in England and Wales is to usually run the two stages concurrently, there are few differences to the process in England and Northern Ireland aside from the process for terminating an assessment.

### Regulatory

- [Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services](#)
- [Complying with GDPR and DPA 2018](#)
- [Independent Review Mechanism \(England\)](#)
- [Independent Review Mechanism \(Cymru\)](#)
- [Fostering Panels \(Establishment and Functions \(Wales\) Regulations 2019](#)
- [Housing \(Wales\) Act 2014](#)
- [The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2013](#)
- [The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review](#)
- [The Foster Placement \(Children\) Regulations Northern Ireland 1996](#)
- [The Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations 2011](#)
- [The Fostering Services National Minimum Standards \(England\) 2011](#)
- [Training Support Development Standards \(England\) 2011](#)
- [Induction Framework for Foster Carers \(Wales\)](#)

### Guidance

- ‘Undertaking a Fostering Assessment’ Roger Chapman – CoramBAAF (updated 2019) (CoramBAAF publication)
- Effective Fostering Panels, CoramBAAF 2019 England (CoramBAAF publication)
- Fostering Regulations, Guidance and NMS 2011 (England), (Fostering Network publication)
- Undertaking Checks and References in Fostering and Adoption Assessments (CoramBAAF 2019)
- CoramBAAF Guidance notes for Prospective Foster Carer Report (Form F)
- CoramBAAF Practice Notes:
  - 42: Placing Children with Dog-Ownning Families
  - 51: Reducing the Risks of Environmental Tobacco Smoke for Looked After Children and their Carers
  - 55: Using the Internet in Fostering and Adoption Assessments
  - 60: Undertaking Overseas Checks in Fostering and Adoption Assessments



- 61: Home Safety Checks in Fostering and Adoption

## Definitions and Abbreviations

EO – Enquiry Officer

ADM – Agency Decision Maker

APA – Agency Panel Advisor

ASW – Assessing Social Worker

HHM – Household Member

PA – Panel Administrator

RSO – Recruitment Support Officer

AM – Assessment Manager

FSW – Fostering Social Worker

Foster Care Services Manager (Kent)

Local Admin – Registration Administrator

TSD's - Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care

WIF's – Wales Induction Framework Standards