



Practice Guidance: Assessment of Adopters

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1. Purpose

Effective preparation, assessment and support of prospective adopters enables them to consider a wide range of children, to manage the tasks of adoption and to help children to recover from the impact of their early life experience of loss and trauma.

Where the Pre-Assessment Decision is that the prospective adopter appears to be suitable to adopt a child, and they have notified Adopt North East that they wish to proceed, the application then proceeds to Stage Two of the process - the assessment process.

Stage Two is about intensive training and assessment. Intensive training should be provided as necessary and, in parallel, an assessment carried out of the prospective adopter's suitability to adopt and a report produced of that assessment.

2. Process

This stage should begin with a meeting or pre-planned phone call between the prospective adopter and the allocated social worker. This should be within 3 working days of allocation unless otherwise agreed by a manager and communicated with the prospective adopter. The social worker should explain how Stage Two will operate and what will be required of the prospective adopter. The social worker should explain the decision-making process and the role of the Adoption Panel, the Agency Decision Maker and the Independent Review Mechanism.

Prospective adopters will be encouraged to register on Linkmaker when they have successfully completed stage one, where they will be given access to the profiles of children for which the Agency is currently family-finding.

The allocated Social Worker should:

- Check that the adopters have linked themselves to their allocated social worker on Link Maker;
- Ensure at this stage that the prospective adopters have their workbook (see [Local Resources](#));
- Make sure they are recorded as the allocated worker on LCS and read all information gathered about the prospective adopter during stage 1 including documents, case notes and management reflections.;
- Note the dates for Quality Assurance and Panel;
- Check the LCS Record to ensure that all checks are completed and all relevant documents have been uploaded. For Fast-Track assessments i.e. second time adopters or foster carers who want to adopt a named child) it is the responsibility of the allocated Worker to follow these up.

A decision must normally be reached as to whether the prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child within four months of the date on which Adopt North East received the prospective adopter's notification that they wish to proceed with the assessment process. Reasons for any extensions should be recorded on the prospective adopter's case record using the reason codes in use by the Agency.

Stage Two will end with Adopt North East Agency Decision Maker's decision about the suitability of the prospective adopter to adopt a child.

If during assessment sessions concerns identified in Stage One are not resolved or become more worrying, then they should be raised and discussed with a Team Manager.

3. Planning for Assessment

A written agreement (see [Local Resources](#)) must be entered into with the prospective adopter ('the prospective adopter assessment agreement') which must include the following:

- The procedure for assessing the prospective adopter's suitability to adopt a child;
- Any applicable timescales;
- The arrangements for the prospective adopter to receive any additional counselling or preparation for adoption;

- Details of any training that the prospective adopter has agreed to undertake; and
- Any other matters which Adopt North East considers relevant.

4. Conducting an Assessment

In conducting the assessment, the assessing social worker should analyse and consider the information they ascertain from and about the prospective adopter, including any issues identified during the adoption preparation.

Reference should be made to the Secure Base Model throughout the assessment, particularly within the analysis and the recommendation summary in considering approval (see Local Resources).

The approach should be objective and inquiring, with information evaluated and its accuracy and consistency checked.

Quotes from prospective adopters should be used and referenced but, as it is self-reporting, should not be relied upon without analysis. Analysis should be evidence based and not simply a restatement of the information already reported.

The assessment will comprise a series of interviews, the majority of which will take place in the applicants' home. Applicants should be interviewed at least once both individually and with their partner if applicable, and all other members of the household will also be interviewed, including the children.

Ensure checks and DBS checks has been completed in Stage 1 for any other adults living in the household. The assessment should cover their history; relationship with the adopter and their role with any children to be placed within the family. Suggest and encourage Family and Friends Training offered by the Agency.

The areas covered in interviews will follow the subject areas:

- Individual profiles of all members of the household, including a photograph and physical description, racial origin, cultural and linguistic background, religious persuasion, personality and interests, relationship (if any) to the child;
- Information about any existing children who live outside of the household.
- Information about the home, the local community and the neighbourhood;
- Details of education and employment - past and present;
- Income and expenditure;
- Details of past and present relationships;
- Motivation to adopt

- Parenting capacity, experience of being parented and experience with children;
- Support network, including wider family network;
- Views and feelings about adoption and its significance, attitudes to birth families and approach to openness in adoption and contact;
- Views about parental responsibility and what it means;
- Views about a suitable home environment for the child;
- Views about the importance and value of education;
- Views and feelings about the importance of a child's religious and cultural upbringing;
- Views around maintaining relationships for an adopted child within their best interests;
- Specific matching considerations;
- Early Permanence Planning; Fostering for Adoption should be explored in detail and a full explanation of the decision should be noted;
- Any other information which indicates how the prospective adopter and anybody else living in the household is likely to relate to a child placed for adoption;
- Testamentary Guardian;
- Any other relevant information which might assist the adoption panel or the adoption agency;
- Apply the Secure Base model in analysis and recommendation.

As part of the assessment a family tree and chronology of key events in the applicant's life from birth must be compiled, showing his or her educational, employment, marital and/or relationship history and addresses for the previous 10 years; any gaps and/or unusual patterns should be explored.

All information provided by the applicant must be independently verified where possible, by checking it against other sources such as referees.

Where an applicant has been divorced or separated, factors contributing to the breakdown of the relationship should be verified. Ensure ex-partner references have been sought in Stage 1.

Where the applicants have pets, a risk assessment (see [Local Resources](#)) should be conducted, and any associated risks should be considered about the pet itself and where the pet is kept.

Risk assessment should be completed should a prospective adopter holds a gun licence; this will need to be signed off by the ADM before Panel (see [Local Resources](#)).

The assessment will consider the likely need for adoption support services of the prospective adopters and any member of their family. As part of this, the family's finances should also be discussed.

5. Timescale for Assessment

The Agency will endeavour to complete assessment and consider the application at Panel and make a decision within four months of Notification of Wish to Proceed by adopters.

There will be occasions however when the Agency will need to give consideration to extending the timescale for Stage 2 beyond 4 months from Notification of Wish to Proceed.

The DfE Statutory Guidance on Adoption notes that there may be occasions when Stage Two will take longer than four months, but it is worth noting that it refers to these as 'exceptional' and emphasises that any reasons for an extension must be recorded on the adopter case record along with any supporting evidence for the reasons for the delay.

The guidance is clear that the Agency has the discretion to extend Stage 2 and suggests compassionate reasons as exceptional circumstances where it might be appropriate to do so.

As a result of the statutory guidance relating to Stage 2, the Agency will decide to exercise its discretion and extend Stage Two beyond four months when:

- The Team Manager agrees that the Agency needs a longer period of time to come to an informed assessment:
 - Due to all necessary checks and references not having been returned in time;
 - Expert opinion / assessment is required to inform assessment and remains outstanding;
 - Further Social Worker assessment of the applicants is required;
 - Other reason.

- At the request of the applicant adopters and need for a delay is unforeseen* (*The Agency requirement that the event is unforeseen is that the Agency will have ensured pre-ROI that the applicants are at a settled time/place in their life and any planned changes are completed before applying to adopt);
- A significant, unforeseen change in the circumstances of the applicant, such as:
 - Health of the applicant;
 - Employment of the applicant;
 - Impact of bereavement on applicant;
 - Accommodation of the applicant;
 - Unexpected change to the support Network;
 - Change in motivation to adopt;
 - Impact of assessment process on applicant;
 - Other reason.

When the Agency decides to extend the timescale for Stage 2 beyond 4 months, it should be planned and purposeful. The Agency will not agree to an open-ended delay to the assessment. Where the applicants insist on an open-ended delay, the Agency will request that they withdraw from the Stage 2 assessment process at this time.

Ordinarily, the Agency will agree to two month blocks of additional time – 2 months, 4 months or 6 months delay. Whilst there is no absolute bar, an extension of time for completion of Stage 2 of over 6 months will require the agreement of the Senior Manager and will only be acceded to in wholly exceptional circumstances.

6. Adoption Assessment Report (AAR)

The information gathered during Stage One (the pre-assessment stage) and Stage Two (the assessment stage), including the checks and personal references, will form the basis of the Adoption Assessment Report (see [Local Resources](#)) together with any other relevant information.

The social worker who assesses the prospective adopter should draft the Prospective Adopter's Report highlighting any issues of concern and submit it to their Team Manager 15 working days prior to Panel for quality assurance.

It is expected that any areas of concern will have been discussed in supervision as the assessment has progressed. Another Social Worker or Team Manager may visit in addition to the allocated Social Worker to support the clarification of any areas of

uncertainty or concern, or offer additional expertise, during the course of the assessment.

The Team Manager will quality assure and sign the AAR and return to the Social Worker.

When the Adoption Assessment Report is signed off, a copy will be sent securely or taken in person to the applicant/s for them to check for accuracy; add any comments and sign the AAR and the date of Adoption Panel will be confirmed. The applicants are invited to send any observations in writing within 5 working days, beginning with the date on which they received their completed AAR. Once the AAR is signed by the applicants, this should be uploaded to LCS.

There may be occasions where a second opinion visit is required once a draft AAR has been completed and a draft recommendation as to suitability made (see local resources). A second opinion visit should not be routinely carried out and should only take place once the prospective adopter/s have read the draft AAR and provided their views and comments. Prospective adopters will be advised of the purpose of the visit, detailing the areas of concern requiring clarification ahead of the visit. An independent Social Worker of the assessment will undertake the visit and provide an account of this which will be included in the AAR.

The assessing social worker will then upload the completed AAR and documents (see [Local Resources](#)) to the Panel within 10 working days prior to panel.

The report will include:

- Outcomes from statutory checks;
- A summary by the Medical Adviser of the health report obtained on the applicant/s;
- The agency's assessment of the prospective adopter's suitability to adopt containing a summary of the assessed strengths, vulnerabilities, protective factors and support needs of the applicants referring to the Secure Base Model, together with an opinion of the type of placement likely to be provided successfully;
- Potential risk factors should be highlighted.

Panel administrator will send the following information to panel members 7 working days prior to panel;

- The Prospective Adopter's Report and the prospective adopter's observations thereon;
- Where the Agency Medical Adviser so advises, the medical report on the prospective adopter;

- References;
- Where applicable, relevant information received from the prospective adopter's home local authority; and
- Any other relevant information obtained by the agency.

The applicants are encouraged to attend the meeting of the Adoption Panel, which considers their application.