

Adoption Counts Stage 2 Policy

1. Role of the Recruitment and Assessment Worker

The Recruitment and Assessment Worker in Adoption Counts is a defined role for qualified social workers. They will work as a team across the region and will report to a designated team manager who will have a generic supervisory role in supervising both family finding and recruitment and assessment case work.

Recruitment and Assessment Workers will assess and approve adopters, manage adopter cases and are responsible for family finding for their approved adopters as well as supporting adopters when children are placed. The expectation is that a full time worker will complete 9 assessments per year, pro rata for part time staff.

Recruitment and Assessment Workers will be based in the localities alongside other staff. They will regularly attend team meetings and service meetings with a view to ensuring that the adopters who are approved and assessed can meet the needs of the children from within Adoption Counts. They will maintain good communication with the Family Finders and ensure that adopter profiles are updated as required and that they understand the needs of children who are requiring adoption from within Adoption Counts.

2. The Ending of Stage 1

To ensure consistency within Adoption Counts, the end date for Stage 1 will be the date that the manager reads and signs off the Stage 1 report regardless of whether the prospective applicant has seen the document.

The manager will inform the Recruitment and Enquiry Manager/Officer on the date Stage 1 is signed off so that they can record this as the end date. The Recruitment and Enquiry Manager/Officer will then email the prospective applicant(s) with the outcome.

If the decision of Stage 1 is not to proceed, then prior to this being conveyed to the prospective applicant, the report, along with the manager's comments, will be sent to the Recruitment and Assessment Operations Manager for review.

If the outcome of this review confirms the decision not to proceed, the Recruitment and Assessment Operations Managers will inform the Recruitment and Enquiry Manager/Officer who will record this as the end date. The Team Manager will compose a letter explaining the reasons why the agency is not proceeding and this to be sent to the relevant Operations Manager for review. When agreed it can then be emailed or posted to the applicant.

If the outcome of the review is that Stage 1 is to be progressed, the Recruitment and Assessment Operations Managers will inform the Recruitment and Enquiry Manager/Officer of the date it is signed off and they will follow the procedure as above.

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3. Break Between Stage 1 and Stage 2

Applicants can choose to take a break if they wish and Adoption Counts can also recommend a break between Stage 1 and Stage 2 to allow an applicant to resolve housing, employment or other issues which may arise. The break can be no longer than six months and if the break exceeds this timeframe then Stage 1 will need to be commenced again.

In some circumstances, Adoption Counts will consider assessing applicants in Stage 2 where Stage 1 has been completed by another Agency. The reasons for this could be that an applicant has moved unexpectedly or if another agency does not have the capacity to undertake the Stage 2. Any request by an applicant to start at Stage 2 with Adoption Counts must be agreed by an Operations Manager and all records must be transferred to Adoption Counts by the agency who undertook Stage 1 prior to work commencing.

4. Placing Profiles of All Stage 2 Prospective Adopters On Link Maker

To assist with Family Finding all Stage 2 applicants will have a profile placed on Link Maker. This will be completed following the midway review when the worker's assessment is that there is likely to be a positive recommendation regarding approval they have some understanding of the applicant's matching criteria and ability to meet a child's needs. The profile should contain information on the following;

- Name of the assessing social worker
- Gender of the prospective adopter (s)
- Their ethnicity
- Any birth or adopted children
- Their location
- Any possible matching advice
- Any significant strengths
- If they will consider early permanence placements
- The proposed panel date

5. Stage 2- Fast Track Assessments

There is a fast-track process for some previously approved adopters and for foster carers who can have Stage One undertaken at the same time as Stage Two of the process. Those eligible for the fast track process are:

- adopters who have previously adopted in a court in England or Wales after having been approved under the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 (or corresponding Welsh provision);
- intercountry adopters who adopted after having been assessed under the Adoptions with a Foreign Element Regulations 2005 and
- anyone who is an approved foster parent at the time they apply to adopt after having been assessed under the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (not including those temporarily approved under the 2010 Regulations).

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Although there is no regulatory requirement to carry out police checks or to gather the specified information in relation to the prospective adopter and their household, Adoption Counts has the view that these checks can and should be carried out concurrently with the Stage 2 assessment. Any associated costs of undertaking the checks will be met by the applicant as laid out in Stage 1.

Adoption Counts has no regulatory requirement to provide counselling, information and preparation for adoption in these circumstances and the preliminary Pre-Assessment Decision stage is not necessary. The assessment process will progress straight to preparation of the Prospective Adopter's Report. Any necessary additional or refresher training should however be provided.

In fast track assessments, the decision as to whether the prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child must be made within four months of the date on which the prospective adopter registered their interest in adoption. This includes the time taken to access information from previous adoption agencies and fostering services who have 15 working days to provide such information.

6. Stage 2 –Prospective Adopters Report

Adoption Counts will not usually progress prospective adopters from Stage 1 to Stage 2 until the Stage 1 has been fully completed and signed off by the relevant manager. If there is a delay in a statutory check (s) being returned, consideration may be given regarding moving to Stage 2 following a risk assessment undertaken by the manager as to which information is missing and the information received. This risk assessment must be discussed with and signed off by the Recruitment and Assessment Operations Manager and a clear message given to the applicants about the criteria upon which we are proceeding and the consequences of any information being uncovered when checks are returned. Adoption Counts reserves the right to terminate any assessment if it is discovered that information has not been openly shared. The prospective adopters will receive a letter in writing confirming progression to Stage 2.

The decision as to whether the prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child should be made within four months of the date on which the prospective adopter progressed to Stage 2 and so the Team Manager allocating the assessment will set a panel date with the Recruitment and Assessment Worker at this point. It is expected that the full assessment will be presented to panel by this date at the latest. If this is not possible, then the reasons for the possible delay must be discussed in supervision at the earliest point the Recruitment and Assessment Worker becomes aware that the panel date may not be achieved. The Team Manager will consider the reasons why the Recruitment and Assessment Worker is advising there may be a delay and provide advice on how the issues may be resolved. If the delay cannot be resolved a new panel date will be set, taking the reasons for the delay into consideration. This will be fully documented in supervision and recorded by the manager on

Charms. The reasons for the delay in presenting the Prospective Adopters Report to panel will be fully documented within the report.

The Recruitment and Assessment Worker will complete a Stage 2 agreement with the prospective adopter on the first visit (see Appendix 1 and 2). The Stage 2 agreement sets out the working arrangements for achieving the panel date, setting out what can be expected by and what will be required of the prospective adopter(s). The expectation is that prospective adopters negotiate with their employers to make themselves available during the day for the assessment sessions. The Recruitment and Assessment Worker will explain the decision-making process; the role of the Adoption Panel, the agency Decision Maker and the Independent Review Mechanism. The Stage 2 agreement must be completed and signed by all parties prior to starting the assessment.

The main part of the assessment is a series of visits made by the Recruitment and Assessment Worker. The information gathered during Stage One and Stage Two, including the checks and personal references, will form the basis of the Prospective Adopter's Report, together with any other relevant information. Applicants should be interviewed at least once both individually as well as with their partner if they have one. All other members of the household will also be interviewed, including any children of the applicant(s).

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 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/childlessness
- 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

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- 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
- Any other relevant information which might assist the adoption and permanence panel or the adoption agency.

As part of the assessment it is expected that:

- 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
- An ecomap should be drawn with the applicants illustrating the span of their support network, their whereabouts and the type of support that is offered. Consideration should be given to compiling separate ecomaps for any children already in the family
- 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 and a reference should be sought from the ex-partner. This applies equally to significant relationships between couples who are not married.
- The adequacy and safety of the prospective adoptive home and transport will be assessed
- 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 and the criteria for financial support should also be discussed.
- Where the prospective adopters live in another local authority area, the social worker should ascertain the extent of any support services identified as necessary in their local area.
- Adopters should have an agreed plan for the testamentary guardian.
- The assessment will also cover the applicants' views on post-placement and post-adoption contact, their willingness to pass on information to birth parents about the progress of the adopted child and their willingness to notify the adoption agency if the adopted child dies during childhood or soon afterwards. It is Adoption Counts' expectation that applicants will, as a minimum, be committed to a one off meeting with birth family which may include extended family members where parents are not able to engage in this way. These issues should be specifically reported on to the Adoption Panel in the Prospective Adopters' Report.

The Prospective Adopters Report will include the social worker's assessment of the prospective adopter's and their recommendation as to their suitability to adopt.

Photograph

The photograph of applicants should be kept up to date and applicants should provide their worker with a selection where requested. It should be something natural, fun and smiling where their faces can clearly be seen. It is not appropriate for it to be in a venue where alcohol is present or with drinks in hand and clothing needs to be appropriate. Any other children of the applicants, who are still living in the household should also be in the picture.

Pen Picture of Adopters

The pen pictures should be written by the adopters with input from their social worker. This is the first section seen by social workers, so it needs to promote the adopters and give a clear guide as to what their offer involves.

The key information that should be included in the pen picture is:

- Age(s)
- Occupations
- Where they live with a description of their accommodation
- Brief outline of matching criteria
- Other key strengths
- Interests
- Support network
- How much adoption leave they can take
- Information about any children already in the family and any pets

References

Applicants will be asked to provide the names of three personal referees who must be adults, have known the applicant(s) for at least two years and who are prepared to give personal references on the prospective adopter. Only one of the three can be a family member. Consideration needs to be given to the location of referees and it may be appropriate to interview them when they are visiting the

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applicants rather than travel long distances. Where geography is an issue, this should be discussed with the Team Manager in supervision and agreement reached. A written report must be prepared of the interviews held with each of the referees which should then be sent to the person providing the reference for agreement. A record of the references will be included in the Prospective Adopters Report.

Referees should be people who know the applicants well in a personal capacity, and it is desirable that the referees have direct experience of caring for children, either in a personal or professional capacity. Where there is a joint application, referees should know both applicants, or additional referees will be required.

A written reference must also be obtained from each applicant's current employer and where the applicant(s) work or have worked with children or vulnerable adults, all previous employers will be asked to provide a reference. Where the prospective adopter has made a previous application to foster or adopt, the relevant agency must be asked to confirm in writing the outcome of the application and provide a written reference.

The Recruitment and Assessment Worker will arrange for requests for written references to be requested via Business Support.

The personal referees should be asked to comment on the following;

- The length of time the referee has known the applicant, in what circumstances, how they met and how regularly they are in contact
- Where there is a joint application, the couple's relationship including its stability and quality, the couple's strengths and ways of coping with stress and how mutually supportive the couple is
- The applicants' general physical and emotional well being
- How the applicants relate to children, with examples, and what experience the applicants have of caring for children
- How the applicants have adjusted to childlessness, if this is the case, how they have prepared to become adoptive parents, how much they have shared with the referees and how open they are in talking about the issues surrounding adoption
- If the applicants have children of their own, how the referee thinks another child joining the family will impact and where the applicants are considering a child from a different ethnic background, how they will promote and support the child's heritage as well as any impact on the other children and wider family

- Whether the referee has any reservations or whether the referee wholeheartedly supports the application.

Personal referees will also be visited and interviewed by the assessing social worker. At the start of the interview, the referee will be informed that the information that they share is confidential and that the written report of the interview will not be shared with the applicants unless the referee gives explicit permission to do so. Whilst any issues arising during the interview may need to be discussed with the applicants, the referees consent will be sought prior to this and the information will not be attributed to a specific individual without permission.

Issues for discussion include the following:

- The applicants' personality
- In a joint application, the stability of the couple's relationship
- The referee's impression of the applicant's general physical and emotional well being
- The referee's opinion on the applicant's ability to relate to children and the basis of the opinion
- The referee's opinion on whether adoption is appropriate for the applicant(s)
- Any reservations the referee may have to express about any aspect of the application
- Whether the referee wholeheartedly supports the application
- What support the referee is able to offer the prospective adopters
- Whether the referee has any reason to believe the applicant would harm the children in their care

The Recruitment and Assessment Worker will contact the previous partners of the applicants and will seek references from them when they have been in a cohabitating or meaningful relationship regardless of if they parented or cared for a child together. Where there are any children of the relationship or where children were cared for jointly, the worker will arrange to interview them face-to-face wherever practicable. Children of the applicant(s) living away from home will also be contacted, references sought and an interview undertaken with them. Where an applicant has stated that they have experienced domestic abuse in a previous relationship, evidence should be sought to verify any claims either from the police or from local authority records. Where a decision is made not to contact a previous partner, this needs to be agreed with the Operations Manager and a written record will be placed on file. Corroboration of any such circumstances should be sought through referee

Any decision not to interview an ex partner where children have been jointly cared for must be discussed with and agreed by the Regional Adoption Manager. A written record of this agreement and the reasons for it will be placed on Charms.

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In addition, as part of the assessment, where the applicant has other children, the relevant school(s) or nursery(s) will be contacted, with the consent of the applicant, for information regarding the applicant's ability to promote the child's development and education. A reference will also be requested from the relevant Health Visiting Team.

Adoption Counts must also ascertain whether the local authority in whose area the prospective adopter resides (or has resided for the last 10 years) holds any information about them that may be relevant to the assessment. If so, the agency must obtain from that authority a written report setting out the information. Local authorities asked for this information should comply promptly with these requests and provide this information within 15 working days. In requesting information from a local authority, the agency should seek to ascertain whether records held by social services and education departments hold relevant information about the prospective adopter.

Health

The GP's report should have been written within the 6 months prior to the Adoption Panel meeting which considers the application. The medical advisers for Adoption Counts will review the report and provide a summary of the prospective adopter's state of health as part of the Prospective Adopter's Report. The medical adviser will need to form a view as to the adequacy of the medical reports received and to advise whether additional specialist opinion should be obtained, if for example the applicant is under the care of a consultant. The prospective adopter's current GP may not have a full health history of the prospective adopter, particularly if they have received private medical care outside the NHS. Prospective adopters should be helped to understand the importance of making their full health history available to the agency's medical adviser.

Adoption Counts have a duty to satisfy themselves that prospective adopters have a reasonable expectation of continuing to enjoy good health. The medical adviser should explain and interpret health information from the prospective adopter, their GP, and consultants to facilitate adoption panel discussion.

Smoking

Adoption Counts requires prospective adopters who smoke that they must be smoke free for 6 months before we can accept their ROI. Applicants who are on e-cigarettes would have their ROI accepted but it is expected that they are in the process of giving up and they could not progress to Stage 2 unless this has happened. They will need to evidence, usually via a smoking cessation plan, how they have given up.

See also Adoption Counts' Smoking and e-cigarettes Policy

Management Oversight



The Prospective Adopter Report will be written by the worker directly onto CHARMS as it progresses, section by section. This will enable the Team Manager to oversee it as it develops and provide feedback/ input during supervision sessions.

Adoption Counts expects that all assessments are discussed in each formal supervision prior to completing the sessions and concluding the recommendation. Any issues should be discussed with the relevant manager as soon as is practically possible after the issues arise.

Recruitment and Assessment Workers should ensure that they keep their Team Manager informed of any significant developments within the assessment during and between supervisions. All issues arising in assessments must be the subject of management oversight without delay and not at the end of the process. Any management decisions should be recorded on Charms.

Mid-Way Review

The date for the midway review will be set in the Stage 2 agreement session. Prospective adopters will be asked to complete a feedback form in preparation for the mid-way review and this will be returned to the Team Manager for their oversight. If there are any concerns from the applicants at this stage, the Team Manager will offer to meet with the adopters. Following this, the Team Manager and assessing worker will meet to review progress, discuss any issues raised and identify key areas of work for the remaining sessions.

Triangulation of Evidence

Adoption Counts wants to ensure that there is no sole reliance on self-reported information, particularly where complex or contentious issues are being assessed. Recruitment and Assessment Workers will discuss with their Team Manager who will agree the span of referee evidence and whether additional evidence needs to be sought from other sources.

Where assessments contain complex issues such as disability, cultural difference or mental health issues consultation should take place with professionals who have specific expertise in these areas.

Final Analysis

Adoption Counts requires a detailed narrative section followed by a bullet point list of vulnerabilities and key strengths.

Second Opinion Visits

Where there are specific concerns or issues which require further clarification, it may be agreed through the supervision process that a second opinion visit should be undertaken. The Team Manager must remain mindful of the timeframe for Stage Two and ensure that a second opinion visit does not build in any delay. A second opinion visit should only take place where clarification is needed; they are not routinely carried out.

Signing of the Report

The Recruitment and Assessment Worker who has written the report and the countersigning Team Manager should both sign and date the report, state their qualifications and experience, and confirm

that they appropriately qualified to sign the report i.e. 3 years post qualified as a social worker. The report should then be shared with the applicants for their comments and signatures prior to submission to the panel administrator.

7. Fostering for Adoption

Assessment and Recruitment Workers will discuss with prospective adopters about whether they feel able to consider acting as foster carers for a child for whom adoption is thought to be a very likely outcome. This is usually where, although the local authority care plan is adoption, this has not yet been decided by the court. There is no need for the agency to assess and approve the prospective adopter as a temporary foster carer at the same time as they are carrying out the adopter approval process although the desire to be considered for a Fostering for Adoption placement and their understanding of the fostering role should be explored. The Prospective Adopter's Report should indicate if the prospective adopter is interested in Fostering for Adoption so that applicants can then be considered for this as part of the matching process.

See also Adoption Counts' Early Permanence Policy.

Preparation for Panel

When the Prospective Adopter's Report is finalised, a copy should be sent to the applicants, and they must be notified that the application is to be referred to the Adoption Panel. The applicants should be invited to send any observations in writing within 5 working days, beginning with the date on which the notification was sent. This timescale may be extended in exceptional circumstances. At the end of the 5 working days (or, where that timescale is extended by the adoption agency, as soon as possible after the prospective adopter's observations are received) the following must be sent to the Adoption Panel:

- The Prospective Adopter's Report and the prospective adopter's observations in respect of the report
- 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
- Any other relevant information obtained by the agency.

The date of the Adoption Panel meeting will be communicated to the applicants as soon as possible, together with an invitation to attend the Panel during consideration of the report. The applicants should be provided with written information about the Panel process, its membership, who will attend

and their respective roles. If the applicants know a particular Panel member, the applicants may request that the Panel member stand down. Panel members are in any event expected to declare an interest in these circumstances.

See also Adoption Counts Adoption Panel Policy and Procedures.

8. Post Approval Agreement

Following the decision that applicants are suitable to adopt, Adoption Counts asks all our adopters to sign the Post Approval Agreement (see appendix 3), which will have been discussed with them prior to their presentation to Panel. Adoption Counts asks all our adopters to only consider children from Adoption Counts for the first three months after approval. As detailed previously, adopters' profiles will be placed on Link Maker after the stage 2 midway review, however they should be set up so that they can not be accessed by workers from outside Adoption Counts for the first three months after approval. This is because Adoption Counts wants our adopters to be used for our children as we are then better able to support the children and their families throughout their adoption journey.

9. Post Approval Training

Content of training sessions is under review.

Appendices – under review so not appended

Stage 2 assessment agreement

Stage 2 assessment agreement (fast track)

Midway review – format and questionnaire

Post Approval Agreement

Tools to aid assessment

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