

Recruitment & Assessment of Foster Carers Policy

This policy outlines our process for recruiting and guiding prospective foster carers through assessment and approval, enabling them to work with Soundly Fostering in providing safe and loving homes for children and young people. Additionally, this chapter explains which people are disqualified and therefore not eligible to be assessed as foster carers.

Soundly Fostering would like prospective carers to show commitment to improving children's lives, as well as demonstrating the wish to work therapeutically and professionally as members of the team. Soundly Fostering has a recruitment criterion in place, which has been co-created by children in the agency.

We are an agency who expect clear and honest communication.

Regulations and Standards

The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011

Regulation 26 - Assessment of prospective foster parents

Regulation 27 - Approval of foster parents

Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards

Standard 13 - Recruiting and assessing foster carers who can meet the needs of looked-after children

Legislation

Children Act 1989

Equalities Act 2010

Responding to Enquiries

We welcome having open, no obligation discussions about fostering with interested people and consider that all questions and interactions are important.

Our recruitment strategy is not to pressurise or sell the idea of working with us. Rather, we believe in finding the right fit, both for you, the children we support and for Soundly Fostering.

In our view, no conversation is wasted, nor is the time it takes to decide to undergo a fostering assessment. We consider all chats and communication to be part of the process of building sound and supportive working relationships.

You can contact us about fostering via our website, by phone or email, and one of our team members will always be happy to talk with you.

All enquiries to Foster will be answered with an initial phone call within 24 hours. Generally, we will get back to you as soon as we can. One of our team members will initially speak about fostering requirements with you.

Soundly Fostering will need to know the following information at the point of deciding whether to visit you to discuss progressing your fostering enquiry:

- Full name, date of birth, address, email address and telephone number.
- Details of current and any previous marriage, civil partnership or similar relationship.
- Names of other members in the household and their ages.
- Details of their accommodation, including available bedrooms for foster children.
- Previous experience and details of any other approvals already given.
- Type of fostering sought (short breaks, short-term, long-term, number of children, etc.).
- The outcome of any request or application made by them or any other member of the household to foster or adopt children, or for registration as an early years provider.

If your circumstances appear positive and you would like us to explore the prospect of progressing with an assessment more seriously, we will arrange a time to come and meet you and your family in your home.

Stage One of the Assessment

Stage one of the assessment process is intended to provide the decision maker with basic information about the applicant to enable clearly unsuitable applicants to be sifted out without unnecessary bureaucracy or expenditure of time and resources by the fostering service or the applicant.

More detailed information is collected in the assessment.

Where a person applies to become a foster carer, and it is decided to assess their suitability, the following information must be obtained as soon as reasonably practicable relating to the applicant and other members of their household and family:

- Full name, address and date of birth.
- Details of health (supported by a medical report).
- Particulars of any other adult members of the household.
- Particulars of the children in the family, whether or not members of the household, and any other children in the household.
- Particulars of their accommodation.
- The outcome of any request or application made by them or any other member of their household to foster or adopt children, or for registration as an early years provider, including particulars of any previous approval or refusal of approval relating to them or to any other member of the household.
- If the applicant has, in the preceding twelve months, been a foster parent approved by another fostering service provider, the name and address of that fostering service provider.
- Names, addresses and emails of between two and six persons who will provide personal references.
- In relation to the applicant and any other member of the applicant's household who is aged 18 or over, an enhanced criminal record certificate.
- Details of current, and any previous, marriage, civil partnership or similar relationship.
- The views of the local authority in whose area the applicant lives, if different.
- Where the applicant has previously been, or is currently, approved as a foster carer by another fostering service provider, or as a prospective adopter by an adoption agency, and consents, access may be requested to the relevant records compiled by that other fostering service provider/ adoption agency in relation to the applicant. That service/agency must provide access within 15 working days of a request being received.

Records compiled by another fostering service or an adoption agency can be used to inform the new assessment of the applicant's suitability to foster. For instance, if previous partners have been interviewed in the past to verify facts, and the current assessing social worker is satisfied with the records in respect of these interviews, it should not be necessary to repeat the interviews if no further information is required. The assessing social worker should, however, satisfy themselves as to the quality and continuing relevance of the information before using it to inform the current assessment.

Where, having regard to any information obtained, it is decided (by the agency decision maker) that the applicant is not suitable to become a foster carer, the applicant must be notified in writing with reasons. This notification may be given whether or not all of this information has been obtained. Such a notification may not be given more than 10 working days after all the information has been obtained. The applicant has no right to make representations about the decision or to have their case reviewed under the Independent Review Mechanism. However, the applicant must be informed that they can complain via the fostering service's complaints process if they are unhappy with the way in which their case has been handled. The complaints process should address whether or not the applicant's case has been handled in a reasonable way, rather than the question of the applicant's suitability to foster.

Where all the specified information has been obtained, and notification has not been given within 10 working days that the applicant is not suitable, then the application must proceed to assessment in stage two.

Note that stages one and two of the assessment process can be carried out concurrently, but the stage one information must be sought as soon as possible, and the decision about whether an applicant has completed stage one must be made within 10 working days of all the information required in that stage being received.

They are also required to enter into a written agreement with the Agency stating that the information that they have provided is true, and that they are aware that their failure to comply with this agreement will lead to the refusal of their application.

The fostering manager will allocate the prospective carers to a social worker who will undertake the full assessment of the application.

Checks

Applicants will be expected to undergo Disclosure and Barring Service checks through Soundly Fostering, and all people aged 18 or over living or regularly visiting the household will be asked to complete the Disclosure and Barring Service disclosure forms and produce the necessary identification. These will then be sent to the Disclosure and Barring Service by Soundly Fostering.

Soundly Fostering will also carry out checks by writing to the Probation, NSPCC, relevant Health Trust, Education Service, Schools (in relation to the applicant's own children) and Children's Social Care Services for the area where the applicants live and, if appropriate, where the applicants previously lived, including asking for a check to be made as to whether any of the applicant's children have been subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Where applicants have moved to the UK within the last 10 years, checks will also be made on all members of the household aged 18 and over. The application process for criminal records checks or 'Certificates of Good Character' for someone from overseas varies from country to country. For further information, see [GOV.UK – Criminal records checks for overseas applicants](#).

A check will also be made that the applicants have the right to work and live in the UK.

Where the applicant has made a previous application to foster or adopt, the relevant agency must be asked to confirm in writing the outcome of the application.

Soundly Fostering will record the dates when the checks were sent and the dates when replies were received. The replies to the checks should be placed in the confidential section of the applicant's record.

Where there are concerns about an applicant's circumstances as a result of the information obtained from the above checks, this should be referred to the Fostering manager, and the applicant may be advised not to proceed with the application.

Where the checks reveal that the applicant or a member of the household is a disqualified person (foster carer), the applicant must be advised that their application cannot proceed. This must be confirmed in writing to them, together with the reasons, and retained with their application form.

A person is disqualified from acting as a foster carer if s/he or any adult member of the household has been cautioned for or convicted of a specified offence. A specified offence is defined as an offence against a child*, an offence specified in Part 1 of Schedule 4 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, the importation/possession of indecent photographs of a child under 16 and any other offence which involves bodily injury to a child, other than common assault or battery

A list of these offences is set out in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, except that it does not include an offence contrary to section 9 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (sexual activity with a child) where the offender was under 20 when the offence was committed, and the child was aged 13 or over.

In any other case where there is doubt or where the applicant disagrees with a decision not to proceed with the application and/or is not willing to withdraw, an early referral should be made to the fostering panel and the agency decision maker. In these circumstances, a brief report on the application should be presented to the fostering panel, and the procedure to be followed should be the same as if the report were a full report on the applicants.

If the information leading to a decision not to proceed relates to a previous conviction of one of two joint applicants or a member of the applicant's household, the details of the offence can only be disclosed to the applicant with the consent of the relevant person; without such consent, the applicant can only be informed that the reason relates to information obtained from the checks, but no details can be given.

Information relevant to the application that has been obtained from the Disclosure and Barring Service may only be retained in the applicant's file for a limited period and should be destroyed when a decision is made on the application. The manager should note in the file that the Disclosure and Barring Service information has been destroyed and that the information led to a particular view, without citing the information itself.

Health

The applicants will be provided with the relevant medical form to fill in with their details and send to their GP with a covering letter requesting that the GP complete the Form and send it to the manager. The manager may pass the information to the medical adviser for comment. It is not a strict legal requirement for ALL cases to be automatically referred to the Medical Adviser, but appropriate medical/legal advice must be sought in the event of uncertainty.

Where the medical information suggests that the applicant may not be suitable for health reasons, this should be discussed in detail with the applicant(s), and withdrawal may be advisable at this stage. Additional advice may be sought from the medical adviser, or the medical adviser may raise questions with the GP where this is appropriate. It may be necessary for reports from other health professionals also to be obtained and presented to the medical adviser and the fostering panel.

References

Where the applicant has been a foster carer within the preceding 12 months and was approved as such by another fostering service provider, a reference must be requested from that other fostering service provider. There is no requirement to also interview personal referees (see below). However, additional verbal and/or written references may be sought from personal referees. If the previous fostering service, for whatever reason, does not provide a reference, interviews with two personal referees must be conducted.

Otherwise, each applicant will be asked to provide the names of at least two personal referees, who are adults, have known the applicants for at least 5 years in a personal capacity and are not related to the applicants and two other referees who may be family members or personal friends. All referees should be people who know the applicants well in a personal capacity. Where there is a joint application, referees should know both applicants, or additional referees will be required.

A further reference must be obtained from each applicant's current employer. In addition, where the applicant has frequently changed jobs, written references should also be obtained from past employers.

Where the prospective applicant has made a previous application to foster or adopt, the relevant agency must be asked to confirm in writing the outcome of the application and provide a written reference.

The administrative staff will send requests for references for completion by the referees. The assessing social worker will also interview the personal referees and make a written record of the interview.

References from ex-partners should be obtained where the relationship was significant and or where there was joint parenting of children, and if the children are under 18

years at the time of the assessment. A decision not to seek references from an ex-partner should be referred to the manager and will only be agreed in exceptional circumstances.

Sharing Information For the Purposes of a Fostering Assessment

Sharing information about an existing foster carer is permitted for the purposes of informing a new assessment of a person's suitability to foster. For instance, if previous partners have been interviewed in the past to verify facts, and the current assessing social worker is satisfied with the records in respect of these interviews, it should not be necessary to repeat the interviews if no further information is required. The assessing social worker should, however, satisfy themselves as to the quality and continuing relevance of the information before using it to inform the current assessment.

Information that should be shared, upon request, in order to inform a new assessment of a person's suitability to foster includes:

- The report of the original assessment of the person's suitability to foster, if it is considered by the body requesting the information to be recent enough to be relevant.
- A copy of the report of the last review of the individual's continuing suitability to foster, and any other review report considered useful to understanding the person's current suitability to foster.
- Details of any concerns about standards of practice and what, if anything, is being done/has been done to address them.
- Details of allegations made against the foster carer or their household members, and any other information considered to be relevant to the assessment of the person's suitability to foster.

Information should only be shared with the informed, explicit consent of all parties referred to in the information, including young people, where they have sufficient understanding to consent to the sharing of their information. If they do not have sufficient understanding, the consent of a person with Parental Responsibility would need to be obtained. This means that the person giving consent needs to understand why their information is to be shared, what will be shared, who will see their information, the purpose to which it will be put and the implications of sharing that information.

If consent is refused, the current agency should consider whether there is any information in the records that is a cause for concern. Any information about an applicant's conduct or suitability to foster that has caused concern should be shared, even if the individual has refused consent. If there are no such concerns, and the individual has refused consent, information should not be shared. This may require documents to be redacted to remove information relating to individuals who have refused consent.

Requests for access to information should be accompanied by the written consent of the applicant to the sharing of their information. The receiving service should acknowledge the request within two working days, seek consent from all others referred to in the information within five working days and the information, redacted where necessary, should be provided within 15 working days.

Foster Carers Preparation Course

Following receipt of their application form, the applicants will be invited to attend the foster carers preparation/training course.

All prospective foster carers will be required to attend this training, which is an integral part of the assessment process.

The objectives of the course are:

- To raise awareness and understanding of the key issues which need to be addressed by all foster carers.
- To assist applicants in considering more thoroughly the implications of fostering.
- To assist applicants in determining the type of resource they can offer to the children needing foster placements.

Those facilitating the course will provide written feedback on issues relating to the applicants for the assessing social worker, which must be used in their assessment. Any issues of concern should be referred to the manager.

Where issues emerge during the training, as a result of which the manager decides that it is not appropriate to proceed with the application, the applicants should be visited by a social worker and notified in writing of the decision, with reasons. Advice

should be given on any steps they may take to meet the criteria or on how they might pursue their interest elsewhere, if appropriate.

Where the applicant disagrees with the decision and/or is not willing to withdraw, a brief report on the application should be presented to the fostering panel, and the procedure to be followed should be the same as if the report were a full report on the applicants.

In the case of joint applications, both must attend.

Stage Two

Where stage one's information has been obtained, and no notification has been given within 10 working days that the applicant is not suitable to be a foster carer, the following must be undertaken:

- Obtain the following information relating to the applicant and other members of the household, together with any other relevant information:
- Details of personality.
- Religious persuasion and the capacity to care for a child from any particular religious persuasion.
- Racial origin, cultural and linguistic background and capacity to care for a child from any particular racial origin or cultural or linguistic background.
- Past and present employment or occupation, standard of living, leisure activities and interests.
- Previous experience (if any) of caring for their own and other children.
- Skills, competence and potential relevant to their capacity to care effectively for a child placed with them.
- Consider whether the applicant is suitable to be a foster parent and whether the applicant's household is suitable for any child.
- Prepare a written report on the applicant, which includes the following matters:
 - The information required to be obtained, as set out above.
 - Any other relevant information.
 - An assessment of the applicant's suitability to be a foster parent.
 - Proposals about any terms of approval.

There are no specific regulatory requirements about the way in which assessment information must be collected or presented to panel.

Where, having regard to the information obtained during stage two, it is decided that the applicant is unlikely to be considered suitable to become a foster parent, notwithstanding that not all the Stage Two information has yet been obtained, a brief report may be prepared and submitted to the fostering panel in the same way as for a full assessment report. There is no prescribed length or format for a brief report.

The application will be allocated to a qualified and experienced social worker for a full assessment to be completed. The fostering agency aims to limit the time taken to complete the assessment, from the receipt of the application form until the presentation of the report to the fostering panel, to four months.

However, in cases where an issue arises during the course of an assessment, requiring a decision as to:

1. The future direction of the assessment, which cannot be resolved:
2. By discussion between the assessing social worker and the applicant, or
3. By reference to the social worker's manager, or
4. Consideration should be given to the early referral to the fostering panel; this may delay the process. Even so, the total time would not exceed eight months.

Soundly Fostering has its own assessment template, which incorporates the information listed above and seeks to acknowledge carers' understanding of themselves. Exercises and discussions completed during the assessment process will be used as the starting point for becoming reflective and therapeutically minded foster carers.

All fostering assessments will explore and provide evidence of:

- Caring for children.
- Providing a safe, caring environment.
- Working as part of a team.
- Own development.
- Awareness of self.
- Support network.

The assessment will also look at the applicant's understanding of children's behaviour as communication and how you might support a child displaying behaviour that challenges.

The assessing social worker will carry out a series of interviews with the applicant(s). Due to the pandemic (COVID-19), a decision will be made as to whether interviews will be in person or using a virtual online format, such as Microsoft Teams. However, there will still be a minimum of 2 visits made to the household in person, prior to an assessment being presented to panel.

All children living in the household will also be interviewed by the assessing social worker as part of the assessment. This should be conducted in an age and developmentally appropriate way. In addition, all adults living in the household, and adult birth children who are living elsewhere, should also be interviewed by the assessing social worker.

The suitability of the accommodation must be assessed, and a health and safety checklist completed, including an assessment of risks posed by any pets in the household. Any issues relating to the accommodation that arise from these checks should be recorded on the assessment.

The availability of bedrooms for fostered children should be discussed. The Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011 provide that each child over 3 years old should have their own bedroom or, where this is not possible, the sharing of the bedroom has been agreed by the placing authority.

The applicant must be notified that the case is to be referred to the fostering panel, be given a copy of the report and be invited to send any observations in writing within 10 working days beginning with the date on which the notification is sent. At the end of the 10 working days, or when the applicant's observations are received, whichever is sooner, the report, the applicant's observations on that report, if any, and any other relevant information obtained, must be sent to the fostering panel. The assessment will take into account the outcome of the agency checks carried out and the references obtained.

Applicants may be advised not to pursue their application where it is considered likely that it would be refused in the light of information which indicates that a prospective carer has attempted to cover up or disguise information about offences. The assessment will also take into account the information obtained and observations made during the training course. Applicants may be advised not to pursue their application where it is considered that it might be refused, having regard to

information obtained during the fostering preparation course; clear reasons will be given.

Presentation to Fostering Panel

All the relevant information (incorporating the report from the training course, the applicant's comments, references, a full written report on visits to the referees, chronology, completed Health and Safety checklist, full information about all the statutory checks and the Medical Adviser's report) should be sent to the Panel Administrator promptly before the date of the Fostering Panel meeting considering the application.

The assessing social worker should also inform the Panel Administrator about the arrangements for the foster carers to attend the Panel meeting and whether they require additional support, such as an interpreter. The decision to attend the Panel meeting rests with the applicants, and a wish not to attend will not prejudice consideration of their application. However, we do encourage applicants to attend the panel either in person or virtually. Support will be given in the office or at their own home for the applicants to attend virtually.

At the Panel meeting, the information will be presented by the social worker responsible for the assessment or a substitute with adequate knowledge of the applicant and the assessment.

Foster carers attending the Panel should be invited to give their views or any comments on the application and the reports. The applicant's views and wishes must be presented fairly and accurately within the documentation before the Panel and verbally.

The Panel will consider the written report together with all the supporting documentation and any additional information presented verbally and make a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker regarding the outcome of the assessment, including where approval is recommended, the category of fostering recommended.

The recommendation will be recorded in writing and, where approval is recommended, the category of fostering, any limitations of the approval to named children or conditions as to the age range or number of children to be placed in the foster home

will also be specified. Reasons for the recommendations, the category and any conditions will be recorded in the Panel's minutes.

The applicant will be informed verbally by the chair of the Panel of the recommendation at the outcome of the meeting, or if the carers did not attend, verbally within two working days.

After the Fostering Panel's Recommendation

After the Fostering Panel has considered the report and made a written recommendation, the Panel Administrator will send the minutes to the Agency Decision Maker to consider the recommendations for approval.

Where a brief report has been submitted to the fostering panel, the Agency Decision Maker will take into account the fostering panel's recommendation, determine whether to terminate the assessment or whether the full assessment should be completed. The Agency Decision Maker will consider all the reports and recommendations and decide on the suitability of the applicant to foster within 7 working days of receipt of the panel's recommendation and final set of panel minutes. The decision must be recorded, together with reasons.

Where the application is approved, the category and any terms of the approval must also be specified in writing. Arrangements will be made for the applicants to be given verbal notification of the decision within 24 hours and written notice of the decision, with reasons, signed by the Agency Decision Maker, within 5 working days of the decision.

If a decision is made to approve a foster carer, written notice of the decision and the terms of the approval, signed by the Agency Decision Maker, will be sent to the foster carer together with two copies of the Foster Care Agreement.

Upon approval, foster carers should be issued with an agreed form of identification to enable their role as a foster carer to be verified.

Representations and Independent Review Procedure

If, at Stage Two of the assessment process, the Agency Decision Maker gives a Qualifying Determination that he/she proposed not to approve the applicants as

foster carers, the applicant will be advised that if he or she wishes to challenge the decision, applicants should be advised they have a right to submit representations within 28 days of the date of the written notice of the decision to the Agency Decision Maker. In addition, as an alternative, they may exercise the right to apply to the Secretary of State to request a review of the decision by an Independent Review Panel under the Independent Review Mechanism. Any such application must be made in writing within 28 days of the decision and supported by reasons.

The foster carer will not have the right to request a review by an Independent Review Panel if he or she is regarded as disqualified as a result of a conviction or caution for a specified offence. See Persons Disqualified from Fostering Procedure.

Where it is decided at Stage One of the assessment process that the applicant is not suitable to become a foster carer, there is no right to have the case reviewed under the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).

If no written representations or notification of a request for a review are received within this period, the Agency Decision Maker will decide whether or not to approve the applicant as a foster carer, following a full assessment, or continue the assessment, following a brief report.

If written representations are received within the period, the Panel Adviser/Administrator will arrange for the reports and other documentation to be reconsidered by the Fostering Panel, taking into account the written representations, and make a new recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker. The Panel Administrator will advise the applicant within 7 days of the date of the panel meeting when they can attend, and their written representations will be considered. In these circumstances, applicants who wish to attend the meeting of the Fostering Panel can arrange for a friend or supporter to accompany them.

After considering the representations, the panel will make a recommendation, which the Agency Decision Maker will consider before a final decision is made. If the decision remains not to approve the application, the manager will arrange for the applicants to be informed verbally within 2 working days. Written notice of the final decision, together with reasons, must be sent to the applicant by the Panel Adviser within 7 working days of the panel meeting. Information about the Complaints Procedure must also be sent. A copy of the report to the panel, the panel's recommendation and the decision, with reasons, must be retained on the applicant's case file.

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

The applicant and two representatives of the fostering agency will be invited to attend the Independent Review. After considering the representations, the Independent Review may make a recommendation, which the Agency Decision Maker will consider before a final decision is made.

Written notice of the final decision, together with reasons, must be sent to the applicant within 7 working days of the receipt of the Independent Review recommendation.

Where the decision is to approve the application, the procedure set out below will be followed.

After Approval and the Foster Carer Agreement

Where an application is approved, the foster carer will be allocated a Supervising Social Worker from the Fostering Service. The Agency will request the foster carer to sign a Foster Care Agreement between the Fostering Agency and the foster carer, which contains the information the foster carer needs to carry out his or her functions as a foster carer effectively. The agreement will be placed on our database system (charms) for digital signature and can be downloaded by the foster carer if they wish to keep a copy elsewhere. This will be kept on the foster carer's case record, together with the report and supporting documents presented to the Fostering Panel, a copy of the Panel's recommendation and a copy of the approval decision.

New foster carers will also be given the Foster Carer's Handbook, which covers policies, procedures, guidance, legal information and insurance details and in respect of which the foster carer must digitally sign confirmation of receipt.

They will need to provide the Agency with information about their bank account and their availability to commence caring.

The allocated Supervising Social Worker will continue to provide support to the foster carer up to, during and after all placements – see policies on Supervision, support and training of Foster Carers and Review and Termination of Approval of Foster Carers.

The Supervising Social Worker should also ensure carers understand the need to undertake Disclosure and Barring Service checks and other assessments on any new member of the household and the need to repeat Disclosure and Barring Service checks on themselves every three years (unless they have subscribed to the Disclosure and Barring Service Update Service).

Family Books/Profile

A Profile of the family should be created before panel. This should contain visual and written information to introduce any child placed in the foster home to members of the foster family and the foster home, and to the facilities and environment which are local to the carers. The information should also contain house rules, routines, names of pets, information about how the foster family has fun and any other information to convey what it would be like for a child coming into the household.

Prospective or approved foster carers may consider creating a 'Family Book' which should also identify the approval details of the carers, any special skills they have, the behaviours worked best with and their willingness to manage contact with parents.

This information will be used to identify the suitability of the placement to meet the needs of specific children. It may also be sent to referring social workers when the foster carers have been identified as a potential match, and may be shared with the children in need of a placement.

Register of Foster Carers

A register of foster carers for the agency is formed on our secure charms system, which outlines details of all approved foster carers containing the following particulars:

- The name, address, date of birth, sex and ethnic origin of each foster carer.
- The date of approval and of each review of the approval.
- The category and current terms of the approval.