

Practice Guidance for Foster Carers Expressing an Interest in Adopting a Specific Child

Foster carers wishing to adopt a child they are fostering may be either:

- Short-term foster carers wishing to adopt a child who is subject to a Placement Order or for whom the Care Plan is adoption and where Care Proceedings are still in progress.

Or

- Long-term foster carers wishing to adopt a child who is already subject to a Care Order, but not a Placement Order.

Principles

- Where there is a permanency plan for adoption, there are significant benefits to the child of not having to move.
- Foster carers wishing to adopt should meet the same standards of assessment, preparation and training, information sharing and support as other prospective adopters.
- A matching exercise should be undertaken considering the child's current and likely future needs and the capacity of the foster carers to meet those needs.
- Adoption is different to fostering and foster carers need to:
 - a) Accept that they are providing a permanent home no matter what health or development issues may arise, and no matter what emotional/behavioural needs may arise.
 - b) Understand that support will be offered, but in a different way from the support available to foster carers.
 - c) Accept that if direct contact is planned they will need to participate in this contact and manage this differently as adopters.
 - d) Demonstrate ability and willingness to take on parental responsibility for the child including the financial and emotional commitment for life.
 - e) Consider whether they wish to relinquish their foster carer role, as this is likely to be required for a period of time, if not permanently, depending on the needs of the child being adopted.

Initial Assessment Process

- When a Foster Carer expresses an interest in adopting a child/ren in their care, in the first instance they should be encouraged to discuss this with their Supervising Social Worker. Adopt Thames Valley Family Finder will then liaise with the Supervising Social Worker.
- An Initial Visit will then be carried out, by Adopt Thames Valley within two weeks of ATV being alerted of this expression of interest. It is best practice for the Supervising Social Worker, of child's social worker, to be present.
- It is also good practice for the Family Finder to gather the views of the relevant professionals (child's Social Worker, Team Manager, Supervising Social Worker and IRO) to establish their views and any concerns at this stage. If any concerns are identified or differences of opinion, consideration should be given to convening a professionals meeting to discuss.

- The worker that completes the Initial Visit then needs to create a file for the prospective adopter on LCS, and then complete the Expression of Interest and Initial Visit tasks, and send to an Adoption Manager for authorization.
- The Family Finder will advise whether this is a child who would be likely to be eligible for an Adoption Allowance. If this is a child who would not normally be eligible for an Adoption Allowance, but the foster carer may need financial support, this should be noted. In both instances, advice should be sought from the relevant local authority Service Manager. There should be no expectation that an Adoption Allowance will be agreed.
- If the initial assessment is positive, the foster carer is invited to submit an ROI (there is a specific ROI for foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care), and the assessment is allocated to a social worker as a priority.
- If there are any concerns, the Adoption manager to convene a meeting with the child's social worker, their manager and the family finder to discuss and decide a plan of action. IRO's views also can be sought.
- If the adopter assessment is to progress, consideration is to be given to what training is applicable for foster carers, e.g. the reflective training, preparation and parenting courses. ATV will endeavour to run three one day preparation courses for foster carers a year.
- If the decision is made not to progress, the Assessing Adoption Worker should inform all professionals involved and a careful plan drawn up as to how this decision will be delivered to the foster carers, and what support they will be offered by their Supervising Social Worker. The child's SW and manager to consider the implications for the child, and whether it is appropriate for a child to remain in the current placement until an adopter is found.

Fast Track Assessment

- The assessment should be concluded within 4 months from acceptance of the ROI. If a longer assessment is required, reasons for this will be explained to the foster carers. However, it is in the child's best interest that an assessment is completed as soon as possible.
- Within this assessment the Assessing SW must ensure that the Foster Carers are aware of the differences between fostering and adoption and explore financial issues
- If there are any concerns at any stage of the assessment a further joint visit by the SSW and Assessing Social worker should be considered.
- The Supervising Social worker, the child's social worker, and the IRO to provide a written reference (to be attached to assessment).
- At the midway point (for example at the eight weeks point), a meeting needs to be held between the Family Finder, SSW, child's social worker and assessing social worker. It would be good practice for the children's team manager and the family finding manager to attend, if this is not possible the minutes need to be sent and signed.

* The foster carers agency should provide the carer's fostering report, minutes of approval, any annual reviews, and any other relevant documents. NB: requests for access to information should be accompanied by the written consent of the applicant to the sharing of their information. The assessing social worker may seek permission to read the foster carers files.

The Approval, Linking and Matching process

- Prior to panel the draft Reg 30F PAR to be shared with the family Finder and Social Worker, who should then arrange to visit to the foster carers for a matching discussion.
- After the visit the family finder must ensure that they have manager's authorization to progress to panel, this can be in the form of a linking meeting or formal discussion and is to be recorded on LCS.
- Discussion should take place with the Adoption Manager and panel advisor as to whether the approval and match should be presented at the same panel.
- After the Agency Decision for the match has been received, the first adoption review should be convened as soon as possible. This meeting should also serve as the adoption placement planning meeting where the relevant paperwork, such as the adoption placement plan, adoption notifications, accepting the placement letter etc, will be initiated. At this first adoption review the timing of the adoption application can be agreed. If the child has been in placement more than 10 weeks, the prospective adopter may make an application to court to adopt as soon as Agency Decision for the match is received.

For children in long-term foster care without a Care Plan for adoption.

- Convene a LAC review to consider whether or not to change the care plan from long term fostering to adoption.
- If the decision from LAC review is to change the plan, then the case should be booked with the ADM within 2 months for an adoption decision, and a Child Permanency Report prepared by the LAC Social Worker.
- A placement order would need to be sought from the court.

Direct Application to Court

- Foster carers who have had a child placed with them for more than a year are entitled to give formal written notice to the local authority of their intention to apply to the court to adopt the child. The Local Authority then has 3 months to prepare an Annex A report to the court.
- The new Guidance asks Local Authorities to encourage foster carers to go the Agency route, i.e. Panel, rather than a direct application to court. With a direct application to court, i.e. a non-agency adoption, there is no duty for the LA to provide post adoption support, although if the agency supports the adoption, the agency may give discretionary support. This should be made clear to the foster carers.

General points

- Where carers live in a different Local Authority from the Local Authority responsible for the child, it is usual that the carer should give their notification of intention to adopt to the LA responsible for the child.
- If any worker has concerns about the foster carers they should notify the relevant Family Placement Team/Fostering Agency.
- There will be some variations where foster carers are not from within the authorities of the RAA. However, it is essential there is liaison with the Supervising Social Worker and the relevant Fostering Team.