

Introduction

Deciding to foster a child is a big step. Naturally, potential foster carers are apprehensive about what an assessment entails, and in order to lessen this anxiety we believe in being as open as possible about the whole process. For this reason the coverage given to this topic is quite detailed and lengthy.

Social services departments or independent fostering agencies carry out foster carer assessments. Whilst each of these departments and agencies will differ slightly in how they conduct the assessment process there are many aspects governed by the Children's Act that they all must follow.

It might be helpful to take a brief overview of the various stages potential foster carers go through during the assessment process. Please bear in mind that the following is a generalisation and that not every agency (social services department or other fostering agency) will always fit this pattern.

The First Step

Assuming that you fulfil the department or fostering agencies basic criteria (e.g. on health, your accommodation has the physical space for a child, etc.) and are deemed after a brief interview or discussion on the telephone to be a potential candidate, you will probably be invited along to an introductory meeting on foster care. This meeting will give you the opportunity to find out quite a bit more about fostering and to ask as many questions as you want about the whole process. At the meeting you can start to find out how the agency conducts their assessments and gain a very rough idea of the likely timescale should you choose to apply.

You should also use this opportunity to find out what the agency is looking for in prospective foster carers, how foster care becomes the plan for some children, and what are the 'typical' difficulties and frustrations applicants face, etc. If at the conclusion of the meeting or shortly afterwards you wish to pursue your interest further you may be invited to attend a 'preparation for foster carers group'.

The Preparation for Fostering Group

These groups consist of prospective foster carers like yourself and agency staff, and exist to acquaint you with the range of issues

surrounding fostering and foster care. These groups tend to meet between 4 to 6 times, usually spaced over several weeks. You will usually get the opportunity to meet experienced foster carers, and you may well have the chance to listen to visiting specialist speakers. The groups are a chance for you to question your own attitudes and beliefs in relation to children and fostering. They are also a chance for staff to start to get to know you.

After the sessions you may be asked to think about your application a bit more, and then confirm your willingness to continue. Most will not accept your application immediately, they want you to go home and to think about all you have seen and heard and to discuss the issues with your partner (if applicable) as well as family and friends.

Home Visits

The next stage, should you decide to continue is when you begin to receive 'home visits' from a social worker. The social worker will talk to members of your household both individually and together during these visits.

Bear in mind throughout this stage that the entire assessment process is not solely about deciding whether or not you will make 'suitable' foster carer/s) - it is also about providing you with information in order that you can decide whether or not becoming a foster carer is right for you and your family.

The primary purpose of these home visits is to build up a comprehensive profile of you and the parenting environment you can provide, and to determine the type of child(ren) whose needs you will best meet. Most social workers will assess your suitability to be a foster carer using a document often referred to as the "Form F".

Throughout this stage and in co-operation with you, your social worker will start to fill in your Form F. Upon completion if there are any points of disagreement between you and your social worker they can be recorded. Finally, having read and agreed to what has been written, all sign the document.

Over the next few pages we shall examine the assessment procedure, and in particular the structure and content of the form F

which, once completed, is the major part of a final report that is submitted to the panel.

It is important to point out that your social worker's role is to assist you through the process, and to identify your needs and abilities to see if these can be matched to children who are likely to need to be fostered. Ideally you will build up a close and honest relationship with your social worker, and the finalised Form F will reflect this, being arrived at by mutual agreement.

The whole process, from first home visit to being presented to the Panel for consideration, can take anywhere from about 6 months to over a year, depending on the department or agency, and on such things as how long you had to wait for the Panel meeting to consider your application.

The Assessment Form

The commonly used assessment form consists of five parts, which are summarised over the next few pages. Bear in mind that although the form is extremely comprehensive (which is understandable in the circumstances) your social worker is there to assist you through it. Try to view the report as a joint venture, while acknowledging that most social workers will feel quite comfortable compiling the report, after all they will probably have done it many times before. You on the other hand will be stepping into totally unfamiliar territory. Remember too that you are not expected to be 'perfect applicants' - social workers are not looking for them either. Many know that they do not exist!

Part 1 of the form

This part of the form gives factual information about you. Your agency social worker and you are asked to:

1. Provide details of the social services department or agency. Name, office address, phone number, etc.
2. Provide your basic details. These include the language you speak at home, your religion, ethnic descent, occupation, and current or proposed hours of work. You are also asked to provide a recent photograph of yourself.

3. Outline the children in your household.

This includes their ethnic descent, the type of school they go to, and their relationship to you.

4. State what type of care you are offering.

There are several options - including 'respite care', 'long-term fostering', 'emergency placement', etc.

5a. Consider the type of child or children that you will be suitable to foster.

There is a detailed checklist included, which is to be completed only after a full discussion has taken place between you and the social worker regarding the issues involved. The checklist is intended to reflect a mutually-agreed position between you and the agency, outlining what you all agree would be the most appropriate type of child(ren) for you to foster. It begins with an outline of the children:

First, the age range - for example, that you will be allowed to foster a child or children between the ages of 4 and 9

Secondly, what gender child(ren) will you be suitable to foster

Thirdly, would you be capable of looking after a child or children from a different ethnic or religious background to yourself?

There then follows a comprehensive checklist

Detailing various possible characteristics and backgrounds that you and the agency agree it would, or would not, be appropriate for you to consider to foster. There are over forty possibilities, so the following is only a selection:

Children with hearing impairment.

Children with severe learning difficulties.

Children who may have been physically abused.

Children who are unlikely to make relationships easily. etc.

5b. Describe you and your family.

This covers you and your family's personalities, interests, experiences etc. It is designed to be a 'snapshot' of your family that will aid your agency in the initial stages of matching you with a child.

6. Provide details of any other children.

For example, details of any of your children living elsewhere.

7. Provide details of other adult members who are part of your household.

For example, grandparents living in your home or a lodger.

8. Detail other significant adults who will have contact with any child of your household on a regular basis.

For example, a neighbour or a close friend who visits you frequently, or perhaps a baby sitter you use for children within the family.

9. Detail your accommodation, neighbourhood and mobility.

You need to outline your neighbourhood - its ethnic composition, its schools and recreational facilities, and the public transport that is available to you. You are then required to give a simple description of your accommodation and the proposed sleeping arrangements for any child. You are asked for health and safety information, and finally whether or not you intend to move house in the near future: and if so, what the implications of such a move would be for any child placed with you.

10. Detail any restrictions on pets.

What pets do you already have (if any), and would there be any limitations placed on a child who might bring a pet with her / him?

11a. Confirm whether or not you have a permanent home in the U.K, Channel Islands or Isle of Man.

You also need to provide your date of birth and marital status, with confirmation that the appropriate documentation has been seen by the social worker.

11b. Describe your work and educational history.

This includes periods of raising a family, unemployment, part-time employment and voluntary work. You must also provide your National Insurance number for confirmation of these (where applicable).

11c. Detail the various compulsory checks that have been carried out.

These statutory references include police checks and personal referees. If you have a criminal record you need to make the agency aware of this and ask them if this would stop you being able to foster. In many cases as long as you have not committed an offence recently and the offence did not involve violence against a child the agency may still be prepared to consider your application. You will also be expected to take a medical and complete a medical questionnaire. If you have concerns about a previous illness affecting your application you should speak to your GP about it. Other areas that may be checked include education and employer references (where applicable).

12. List detail of your home visits.

This includes the number of times the visits have taken place, and who was seen at each one. You also need to describe the number and type of preparation group meetings attended, and to describe the ethnic mix of the group and aspects of the training covered, as well as your participation and what you felt had been useful. Any further areas of training that might be required should also be identified. Finally, for those who have not had the opportunity to attend a preparation group there is a chance to list what preparation or training has been utilised instead.

13. Provide details of medical information.

The date of your medical examination, comments from the agency medical adviser, details of any physical, mental or emotional disabilities within your extended family, and details of any disabled children.

14. Give details of personal referees.

You are asked for the referees' relationship to you, the time that they have known you, and comments on the information they have provided. In England and Wales there is a requirement for the referees to be personally interviewed by the agency social worker, and a record of these visits should be attached to the form.

Part 2.

This part of the form details your attitudes and life experiences relevant to fostering a child. Your agency social worker and you are required to:

1. Provide information on your background.

Your parents, siblings and other significant family members. What is the significance of culture and religion in an individual's upbringing, and what are your views on your own upbringing and the impact that has had on you? What are your attitudes to and experience of people with disabilities? Describe your experience of education and work (including unpaid or voluntary work) and your attitude to work and to unemployment. What effect, for example, could unemployment have on family life? Detail your interests and talents, followed by how you perceive yourself - your personality, racial and cultural identity, strengths and weaknesses.

2. Describe your partnership (if any) and how that partnership works.

What qualities do the partners bring to the relationship, what makes it positive for each of you, how do you support each other, how do you cope with problems? How might fostering a child affect this relationship - for example, how will you cope with a child who becomes attached readily to one partner and much more slowly to the other? How are decisions made between the partners, and is there wider family involvement in the decision-making process? What are the strengths and vulnerabilities of the partnership? Have there been previous significant relationships, and if so what has been learnt from these. Do they affect the present partnership? Are there children from any previous relationships, and if so how will those children be affected by the decision to foster and by the child themselves?

3. Provide information on your support networks.

These are the people who you are in regular contact with and who will support you in caring for a foster child. They include family, friends, neighbours and community and religious groups.

4. Give more details of existing children in the household.

Describe their personalities and temperaments, their relationships and any special talents or needs that they might have. How have they been involved in the preparations for fostering, and what is their understanding of the implications of this for themselves?

5. Describe other adult members of the household.

This includes significant adults who don't live in the home. What is their relationship to the family members, their attitude to your intention to foster, and how important is that attitude to you?

6. State the reasons why you have decided to foster.

What motivated you to consider applying to foster? Are both partners (where applicable) equally committed to this course of action?

7. Describe the family's lifestyle.

What activities do the family undertake together? Are there any religious or cultural practices that are important? How is affection shown, what roles do different individuals take, what expectations are there and how are these accommodated within the family unit? What personal space do individuals expect within the family? What is the family attitude to food, and to potential eating difficulties that child might bring with them?

8. Examine your attitudes to Britain as a multicultural and multiracial society.

How is your understanding of it reflected in your present lifestyle? How can children be educated to take a positive view of such a society? What impact can discrimination have on a child, and what understanding do children already in the household have of discrimination?

9. Outline your parenting abilities.

You are asked for a description of your experience of caring for or working with children. What is your understanding of child development, and of how children in foster care might be affected by early experiences? What are your own childhood experiences? In what way would you do things differently to your parents, how flexible would you be in your approach to caring for a foster child? How will you ensure the protection of any child from physical or sexual abuse? You are then asked about behaviour management. What are the rules of the house, how are approval and disapproval shown, and what effect could these methods have on an abused or neglected child? Finally, how would you cope with a child from a different culture or ethnic background, or with a different religion or language? What changes would be necessary in your lifestyle, what difficulties could the child, the existing family and the wider

support network face, and what practical experiences do you have that might help you to resolve these?

10. Outline financial and other support that you might need. What are your attitudes towards money; will you give up paid employment (where applicable); and if so, how will you cope with the loss of income? Who will undertake childcare?

11. Outline various placement and post-placement considerations. What understanding do you have of the effects of loss and poor attachment upon a child?

What is your understanding of behavioural difficulties, and what behavioural difficulties would you find it difficult to cope with - for example, bed-wetting, over-affection, or aggression?

What effect is being fostered likely to have on a child's identity? Do you understand that some black or ethnic minority children might grow up with a negative self-image if fostered by carers of a different race and culture?

Could you care for a child who has been sexually abused, and would you have difficulties in coping with sexualised behaviour resulting from such abuse? How would other children in the family react to such behaviour?

How do you view emerging sexuality in adolescence, and how would you ensure an appropriate sexual education?

How do you view adolescent experimentation - for example, with drink and drugs - and what areas of possible difficulty can you foresee both for yourself and for the foster child?

Where applicable, depending on the type of child it is suitable for you to foster, what understanding do you have of possible issues surrounding the health of a child placed with you, and what is your likely ability to cope with those issues - for example, how would you cope with fostering a child with a life-threatening disease?

Do you feel able to meet the needs of a physically impaired child, or a child with learning difficulties, what local resources are available to you, and what help are you likely to require (for example, adaptations to your accommodation)?

What understanding do you have of the emotional and sexual needs of such a young person?

What is your understanding of possible reasons why children become 'looked after' (taken into care) - for example, parental poverty/physical immaturity/drug abuse/depression etc.?

How far do you acknowledge the importance to a child of being able to understand their past and of maintaining positive links with parents, and will you be able to facilitate such links - for example, by encouraging the child to maintain contact with their family, exchange letters and photographs, keep in phone contact?

12. Describe post placement support

What support does the agency offer, and do you know how to access that support or any other resources? What consideration has been given to 'disruption' (the foster care placement breaking down) and the effect on those concerned.

Part 5

This is a summary of the whole form.

Your agency social worker will be asked to detail how you relate to children, and how well you will work with the agency, the child's family, and other significant adults. What are your strengths and weaknesses, and in what areas might you experience difficulties? What are the agency social worker's recommendations?

Finally, are there any points of disagreement between you and the agency social worker?

You and the social worker upon completion will then sign the form.

Please try to remember

The assessment process is not solely about establishing if you are "suitable foster carers". It is just as much concerned with providing you with information. The more information you are given, the better equipped you will be to decide if, and what type of fostering is the right choice for you.

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