

Leicestershire County Council

Assessing Prospective Foster Carers and Adopters

Introduction

This guidance is provided to assessors for Leicestershire County Council (LCC) Fostering and Adoption Services, for the purposes of supporting the delivery of high quality assessments, which meet the Service, and Panel expectations for recommendations of suitability to foster or adopt.

The guidance covers some of the key areas for assessors, and Leicestershire's expectations with regards to the assessment, including checks and references, and setting out the report. This local guidance should also be read in conjunction with the National Minimum standards for each type of assessment and the respective Coram BAAF Guidance notes for each Assessment (see LCC Assessment Pack for these documents).

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1. Allocation and Timescales

The assessment will be allocated via the contractual arrangement that governs the individual assessment. For example, contract with Core Assets/ Spot Purchase.

At allocation of the assessment by LCC, the timescale for the completed assessment; quality assurance dates; and Panel date will be agreed, and it is expected that all assessors work to complete their assessments, within these specified timescales.

For Core Assets allocations, the timescale for submission of the completed assessment is the end of week 12 of the stage 2 assessment period, allowing for the final quality check by LCC.

For internal assessments, the timescale for submission of the assessment for first quality check is end of week 11, to allow for amendments, and submission for final QA at end of week 12.

Assessments should be deemed "Panel Ready" by end of week 14, allowing 14 days for final quality checks and 14 days for submission to the Panel Administrator and Panel Advisor, and Panel.

2. Assessment Agreement

The assessor is expected to complete the BAAF Stage Two Assessment Agreement (see LCC Form F / PAR Assessment Pack) with the applicants within their first introductory visit to the applicant/s, which will set out the plans for the assessment, visit dates, and the Panel to which their application will be presented. This requires signature by applicants and by the assessor, and must be uploaded to MOSAIC. Any identification of likelihood of not meeting planned visits or Panel dates should be flagged up by the assessor with LCC Assessment Manager, for agreement about how to proceed. It is recognised that there may be circumstances in which the applicants need to change dates but the expectation for both assessor and applicants is that both parties will commit to the assessment plan, and agreement.

3. Supervision

Assessors will be supervised on their work, with at least one face to face and two telephone supervisions, as a minimum during the assessment, in addition to quality feedback processes. Supervision will be recorded on LCC Growing Safety Supervision Templates (see LCC Form F / PAR Assessment Pack for templates).

The supervision is aimed at safety and provision of the opportunity for the assessor to talk through any areas of concern, or direction required. Supervisions should be uploaded to the carer's file in MOSAIC within 24 hours of the supervision session taking place.

The supervising social worker should contact the manager of the Assessment Team immediately after the supervision, if any significant concerns are raised within the supervision and / or if originally set timescales are at risk of not being met.

4. Addressing Leicestershire County Council Children in Care Council views on what they want from Foster Carers

The LCC Children in Care Council have been consulted about what they want from foster carers. The Council is keen to include the child's voice in all areas of the service.

The assessment should include a question to applicants about their response and views to the following question, and this should be included in section B.

Leicestershire children in care say that "they want their carers to be committed, reasonable, open-minded, positive and non-judgemental people, who stick by them when they need someone the most". How will you ensure that you will meet these expectations for the children and young people being cared for by Leicestershire County Council?

5. Birth Children in the Family

Where it is age appropriate to do so, assessors should plan to interview birth children in the family, on their own, as part of the assessment process. As a minimum, assessors should explore with birth children their views, and feelings about their parents' decision to apply to foster or adopt, and what this might mean for them. Secondly, the reference should include an evaluation of the feedback in respect of the parenting that the child has received.

If the child is not of an age and / or developmental stage to be able provide verbal feedback about their parents / carers plans to foster / adopt, LCC would expect that the assessing worker give consideration to undertaking a piece of age appropriate direct work with the child to try and glean some views about their position in regards to another child/ren joining the family home. If work is not completed with birth children, clear reasons for this should be provided by the assessing social worker within the body of their report.

Assessors may decide to use tools, and materials from their own prior work experience to enable assessment and discussion, including an understanding of why children might require foster care or adoption, and what behaviours and emotions may be there for the child. Where particular circumstances are evident, assessors

will need to explore how the needs and wishes of birth children will be met, alongside the fostered or adopted children, for example, birth children with additional health, educational or emotional needs.

Where there are birth children under age 18 who do not live full time within the household, the assessor should plan to interview them, with appropriate sensitivity to circumstances. Assessors should be satisfied that the plan to foster or adopt does not place any birth children in circumstances where they may feel rejected, or where their needs may be compromised.

Checks and references are required in respect of schools for any school age birth / adopted children within the applicant/s home, and these should be evaluated, to cross reference a professional assessment of birth / adopted children, and parental attitude to the educational needs of children. The assessing worker takes responsibility to remain in contact with the Assessment Team administrator to keep in contact about any outstanding stage one checks, which may include school or nursery references.

A separate reference should be written for each birth child, including adult birth children living in the household. This reference should be written up on the Coram BAAF 'Referee Visit Report' (see LCC Form F / PAR Assessment Pack for template) and appended to the completed assessment. The reference should detail the work undertaken, confirmation of seeing the child/young person alone, and an evaluation of the impact of fostering on the child- both positive and areas of vulnerability. The reference should then be appended to the Form F or PAR, and should not be shared with the applicants.

6. Evidence to support the Recommended Approval Category

The assessor should gather and analyse evidence which supports the approval category that they are recommending i.e. why respite, why fostering to adopt etc. Evidence will be found in checks and references, discussions with applicant/s, from training feedback, and through focussed case examples, as a minimum. The Council is committed to utilising anonymised profiles of children and young people, to enable discussion around real cases, and enable reflection on how carers would approach meeting their needs. These can be provided on request by the Assessment Team administrator.

Where approval is recommended for 2 or more children, the assessor must show how the capacity, space and skills of the foster carers or adopters will enable them to meet the needs of all children, including physical needs, bedroom space, emotional and health needs, educational needs, leisure and social needs, and additional needs associated with care plans for children in specific circumstances. The summary analysis must reflect this assessment.

Where approval is recommended for a particular age range, the assessor must demonstrate evidence to support why this age range, including teenagers, or younger children or babies. This will require focus on the skills, experience, knowledge and aptitude of the carers.

Where approval is recommended for a particular placement type, for example Specialist Fostering, the assessor should refer to the job description for that category, or the assessment requirements set out for particular circumstances (see LCC Form F Assessment Pack for 'LCC Fostering' document, which charts the different types of fostering and Leicestershire schemes and some of their key assessment criteria).

7. Permanent/Long Term Fostering

Where the assessor is seeking to recommend approval for long term or permanent fostering, the assessment must show what considerations the applicants have given to the long term issues for a child or young person, including how identity issues, and contact wishes in respect of birth family may change during the teenage years, or earlier.

The applicants' skills, commitment long term, understanding and expectations of the child and their family life must be assessed. It is also important that any assessment of prospective long term applicants, considers the extent of their childcare experience and any fostering experience which may aid them in the task of long term fostering.

LCC would expect of our long term carers that they continue to undertake 28 hours of training per year per household.

8. Parent and Child Fostering

Where the applicants are seeking approval for parent and child placements the BAAF Appendix D Parent and Child Assessment Guidelines should also be completed.

The format details the evidence and areas for assessment required (see LCC Form F Assessment Pack for 'Parent and Child Report' template).

9. Fostering to Adopt

LCC have an increasing number of adopters who have been approved as fostering to adopt prospective adopters and with whom we have successfully placed foster to

adopt children. Whilst LCC have for a long time provided a brief introduction to fostering to adopt within the Stage Two Training for adopters, the Service is (at the time of drafting this guidance) working with Coram BAAF to introduce a more thorough programme of training to adopters who are considering fostering to adopt. Once this has been confirmed, the training material will be included within the LCC PAR Assessment Pack.

The most recent Coram BAAF PAR Template (2016) has headings and prompts within it which ask the assessor to evidence the applicant/s understanding of fostering to adopt and their ability to meet the needs of foster to adopt children.

It is important to note that LCC do not see applicant/s having a birth child/ren as an automatic barrier to being approved as fostering to adopt prospective adopter. The Service is also trying to change the culture of LCC whereby fostering to adopt is a consideration for all children with ADM decisions for adoption. Assessors will be encouraged to have conversations with all applicants about the possibility of fostering to adopt forming part of their approval (even those considering “older” children i.e. 3 years old plus). Assessors should provide all applicants considering fostering to adopt with the Coram BAAF Fostering to Adopt Leaflet (see Assessment Pack for a copy).

10. Second Time Adopters

There are a number of second time adopters who return to the service – both who approach the Council for a second time and those who the Service approaches to consider a related sibling to a previously adopted child.

These prospective adopters are not asked to attend Stage Two training (as they have attended this previously) but assessing social workers are asked, very early on in the assessment process, to check if the prospective second time adopters wish to attend any specific training which the Service will endeavour to source i.e. such as “telling” training or therapeutic parenting training.

Assessing social workers will need to arrange with LCC to come in and read the adopters previous file. This can be arranged with the Assessment Team administrator.

11. Checks and References

Checks and references are sent out during Stage 1 of the assessment process, by the service. However, there are occasions where they have not been received back into the service prior to the start of Stage 2. Where there are Stage 1 checks outstanding, the service will draft a letter to applicant/s stating that they are starting Stage 2 but with outstanding checks. The letter states that should concerns arise about the outstanding Stage 1 checks then they may have cause to consider terminating the assessment.

Where checks are outstanding it is the assessors' responsibility to keep in communication with the service to ensure that they are aware of any checks outstanding. Where necessary, the assessor should agree that they will follow up on outstanding checks, in order to meet deadlines. Where checks and references are received, during Stage 2, the Business Support worker will e mail the assessor to advise that the check is now on MOSAIC, and can be viewed. It is the responsibility of the assessor to view the check, and evaluate this within the Form F or PAR.

Where information suggests that the applicant would not be suitable to foster, or raises concerns, this should be discussed without delay with the supervisor of the assessment. Advice will be sought from the LCC Assessment Team Manager as to whether the information constitutes a Stage 1 check, which may lead to ending of the assessment.

The assessor must ensure that all information from checks and references is included in the Form F, before First Quality Check.

No assessments should be provided to Panel without all checks and references having been included. The Quality Assessor within Core Assets will be expected to complete a 'Declaration of Compliance Form' (See LCC Form F / PAR Assessment Pack) which confirms that they have checked that all checks and references have been completed before Panel submission.

Checks: Health and Safety; Fire Safety (Form F); Safer Caring Policy (Form F); Pet Assessments all require completion on the documentation provided by Leicestershire County Council. It is the responsibility of the assessor to ensure these areas are assessed and any actions identified, with progress detailed in the Final Form F or PAR.

References: As a minimum the assessor must interview 2 none related personal referees and one family member referee, and all children of the applicants including adult children. Each reference should be submitted on a separate document, and appended. For adult birth children, and those of an age to give informed consent, they should be asked to sign the reference prior to submission to panel. References should be evaluated for weight given to the reference, and analysis of the information for the Fostering or Adoption task. Assessing social workers should also undertake phone references with current supervising social workers of any carers transferring to LCC and / or the social workers of any looked after children who are currently residing with carers / prospective adopters.

LCC have a policy of seeking ex-partner references for any significant previous ex-partners, but particularly for ex-partners with whom an applicant has a birth child/ren. The Service may also seek a reference in respect of a significant relationship, which did not result in birth children. A relationship may be considered significant if the applicant has previously lived with that person and / or if they have been in a

relationship with them for over 1 year. Often the Service will only consider relationships which the applicant has had when they are over 18 years old.

These ex-partner references are not sought in Stage 1 but progressed in Stage 2, due to their often sensitive nature. The Core Assets assessing social worker must take responsibility for progressing ex-partner references (via phone interviews). Where ex-partner references have not been undertaken (either because it is not appropriate or because the ex-partner is uncontactable), the assessing social worker must evidence (within the Form F or PAR) that they have considered whether a reference should be taken and that if this has not been possible (for safety reasons or because the ex-partner is uncontactable) they must report upon the nature of that relationship via a third party corroborating reference (reported upon within the Confidential Section of the PAR or Form F).

12. Carers who smoke

Leicestershire County Council aims to provide foster carers and adopters who do not smoke.

Where any member of the Fostering/Adoption household smokes, the household cannot be approved for children under 5 years. Where there is a household member who smokes, it is required that smoking takes place outside of the home, and the applicants are informed that this will be assessed on supervision visits and future unannounced visits. Prospective carers and adopters should be provided with information about the impact of passive smoking, and encouraged to understand why the Council is requiring a smoke free environment for all children and young people.

13. Bedrooms for Children and Young People

Foster carers and Adopters should have a separate bedroom for each child they plan to care for, at a given time. The room should be adequately and warmly furnished, with a bed/cot, drawers and appropriate storage for belongings. The carers must be willing for changes to décor, and soft furnishings to reflect personal choice of children placed.

Where the foster carers wish to be approved for siblings, it is possible to match same sex siblings to share a bedroom. Approval can reflect the maximum number of children to be placed, with matching considerations being that same sex siblings would share. Unrelated children must not share bedrooms including with the carer's own children.

Babies up to age 2 may share the bedroom space of the adult approved foster carers, but must not share a bed.

14. Transfer In – Assessing Foster Carers currently fostering for another agency

Where foster carers are transferring to Leicestershire County Council from another agency, the timescales are likely to be reduced and planning by the assessor should reflect the timescale required.

Leicestershire County Council require the preparation of a new Form F, but information from the previous Form F may be obtained from the original one.

The Fostering Network Transfer Protocol will be followed and adhered to where the applicants have a child placed, from a different agency to Leicestershire County Council. The responsibility for convening the Transfer meeting lies with the Stage 1 worker, but will be attended by a member of the Leicestershire County Council Fostering and Adoption service. It is expected that the assessor will also attend.

It is the responsibility of the assessor to undertake file reading of the foster carers' files in the current agency, and to arrange that appointment. The assessor should consider any information on file which appertains to evidence of skills and competence for fostering; current approval category, and any proposed change, whereby evidence to support changes should be investigated. The date of original approval should be included, and any changes to approval over the time of registration should be detailed. Any safeguarding concerns should be noted, including outcomes. Any standards of care issues should be noted with outcomes. The training record from the previous agency will need to be detailed in the Form F. Previous partner references may be witnessed, and where the assessor is of the opinion that there is no change to circumstances, the previous partner reference may stand for the new assessment.

Dates of the file reading should be noted within the report.

Prior fostering is likely to be a rich source of evidence for the current assessment.

The Form F should detail the arrangements for the proposed transfer date, subject to Panel and ADM agreement. This should be agreed with the current agency, to ensure no gap in registration dates.

A reference from the current agency should be obtained, in writing, to include:

- Date of approval
- Placements that they have had, by description of placement type, rather than individual information
- Overview of competence for fostering, and quality of care provided
- Any safeguarding or standards of care issues, with outcomes
- Ability to work with professionals

- Training attended
- Anything else the agency wishes to add

15. Training

The record of the applicant's attendance at Skills to Foster, or pre Adoption training will be available on the MOSAIC system. The assessor should include the written overview of the applicants approach and engagement with training. The assessor must include applicants' views about training within the report. Copies of training slides can be provided to assessing social workers on request.

16. Reading the Report and Signatures

The applicants must be given time to read the report, with confidential references removed, and to make comment on it. The report should be signed by applicants, including all sections which require their signature separately.

The fully signed report should be provided to the Panel. It is the assessor's responsibility to ensure and arrange for the final report to be signed, within timescales required.

17. Brief Report

Where the assessor and Leicestershire County Council agree that the Stage 2 assessment should not continue, applicants should be offered the opportunity to have a brief report presented to Panel. There is no requirement for this as a matter of procedure, but where the applicants wish to have their assessment considered by Panel, this must be agreed.

There is not a set format for the brief Report, and its content will depend on the circumstances and reasons for ending the assessment.

The report must detail how many sessions have been undertaken, the reasons that the service does not want to proceed to a full assessment, and a summary of work undertaken.

Applicants must be provided with a copy of the Brief Report, in advance of the Panel meeting, and invited to submit their own views in writing, which should be provided to the Panel Advisor, and Assessment Manager, for circulation to Panel.

Applicants must be provided with written information about their rights, and right of appeal.

Appendices

- i. LCC Assessment Pack (Form F) which includes the following folders:
 - a. Coram BAAF 2017 Checks and Refs Forms (relevant to S2)
 - b. Coram BAAF 2017 Form F Docs and Accompanying Docs
 - c. LCC Appendices Docs
 - d. Supervision and QA Folder
 - e. LCC Types of Fostering (which includes a document charting our payment structure / financial offer to carers).
 - f. Additional Docs – Coram BAAF 2017 Form F Advice, Panel Feedback Oct 2017 (Reasons for Deferrals) and the Fostering Services 2011 National Minimum Standards

- ii. LCC Assessment Pack (PAR) which includes the following folders:
 - a. Coram BAAF 2017 Checks and References (relevant to S2) Coram BAAF PAR Templates
 - b. Fostering to Adopt
 - c. LCC appendices (req for assessment)
 - d. Supervision and QA Folder
 - e. Additional docs – Adoption National Minimum Standards 2014 and the Coram BAAF 2016 PAR Guidance Notes and Assessment Tools