**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 one of a group of designated team managers 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 Hub and each Spoke alongside other staff. They will attend the monthly strategic matching 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 their adopters understand the needs of children who are requiring adoption from within Adoption Counts.

1. **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 at that point.

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 relevant Operations Manager for review.

If the outcome of this review confirms the decision not to proceed, the Team Manager 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 can then be emailed or posted (recorded delivery) to the applicant.

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

1. **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 any work commencing.

1. **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).

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 meet 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 and groups for second time adopters and foster carers are regularly held throughout the year.

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.

1. **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 return, consideration may be given regarding moving to 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 relevant Operations Manager and a clear message given to the applicants about the criteria upon which we are proceeding. The consequences of any information being uncovered when checks are returned must be clearly explained and that 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 with this proviso.

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). 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 should 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) whether resident with the applicant or not.

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, including references taken from significant ex-partners
* 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
* 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 including a social media check.

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 and where an applicant has been in a relationship with someone who is a parent. This may include seeking a reference from the child with whom they had a relationship.
* 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 with birth relatives. This will include 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 meeting with birth family (which may include extended family members where parents are not able to engage in this way) in order to share information and to establish a relationship for good quality ongoing contact, be that via letters or in person. Adoption Counts also recognises and promotes the value of maintaining sibling relationships where siblings are not able to grow up in the same household. These issues should be specifically reported on to the Adoption Panel in the Prospective Adopters’ Report, including the applicants’ views and understanding of the benefits of these relationships with regards to the identity of adopted children.

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, including their degree of openness to contact
* 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 and checks**

Personal referees will also be visited and interviewed by the assessing social worker during Stage 2. This will build on the information shared in the written reference provided in Stage 1. 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 confirm the content of the written reference provided in Stage 1. If there is any information which requires exploration, then the assessing work should arrange to interview the ex-partner in person.  The recording of these discussions should be recorded on the applicant’s Charms record and a summary added to the references section of the PAR along with the other personal references. 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.

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.

In circumstances where the applicant is no long in contact with an ex-partner, rigorous attempts should be made by the applicant in conjunction with the assessing worker to establish their whereabouts. A range of options should be explored including social media, mutual friends, extended family members and last known addresses. Should an applicant feel at risk in any way, for example where they experienced domestic abuse in a previous relationship then an assessment of the risk, together with supporting evidence should be compiled by the assessing worker for discussion with their team manager and the relevant operations manager.

**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 adviser 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 CoramBAAF Practice Note 68 (reducing the risks of environmental tobacco smoke for LAC and their carers)*

**Management Oversight**

The Prospective Adopter Report will be written up by the worker 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 and relevant discussion recorded by the manager on the Charms record. 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 clearly recorded on Charms.

**Mid-Way Review**

The date for the midway review will be set in the Stage 2 agreement session and the form sent to the applicants by Business Support. 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, mental health or addiction issues, consultation should take place with professionals who have specific expertise in these areas in order to inform the assessment and any additional areas for exploration.

**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 where assessments are completed by Adoption Counts staff.

Where an assessment is undertaken by an Independent Social Worker, it is considered good practice for the member of staff who will be taking case responsibility and supporting the applicants to undertake a visit prior to panel. This may be a joint visit in the assessment or a second opinion visit.

**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 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.

1. **Fostering for Adoption**

All applicants will be encouraged to attend the regular Fostering for Adoption training briefing and attendance is mandatory for all applicants who wish to be considered for a child aged 0-2 years. Assessment and Recruitment Workers can then have an informed discussion 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 a spectrum of risk in these types of placements and the degree of risk each applicant feels able to manage should be explored.

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 and under what circumstances so that applicants can then be considered for this as part of the matching process. The approval process for a Fostering for Adoption placement will then be carried out by way of a written addendum should a placement be identified.

*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.*

1. **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. 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.

1. **Ongoing Training**

Adoption Counts’ offers a comprehensive programme of training for applicants throughout stage 2 and beyond. This includes sessions on Fostering for adoption, Taking Siblings and a day for the members of the applicants’ support network. In addition, there is a 6 month rolling programme of training which applicants are expected to attend which covers Talking about adoption, Identity and relationships through contact, Linking and Matching, Medical issues, Attachment, play and parenting styles and Trauma.

All applicants will also be added to the Adoption Counts Mailing list and will have access to the wide range of workshops and training offered through the Centre of Excellence for Adoption Support.

**Appendices**

1. Stage 2 assessment agreement
2. Midway review
3. Post Approval Agreement

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