**Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Policy**

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# **About This Document**

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| Title | Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Policy |
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| Updated by  | **Mark Hagon, Corrie Castleman and Elise Lazell** |
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| March 2015 | **5.0** | **Section 6 added regarding transfers from IFA’s to Essex Fostering Services** | **Rosemarie Cronin** |
| April 2015 | **5.1** | **Addition to selection of foster carers to include the right not to approve any applicant who has had recent or ongoing involvement with Social Care where there are child protection concerns** | **Rosemarie Cronin** |
| February 2018 | **7.0** | **Updated information from Fostering Network regarding transfers of foster carers** | **Rosemarie Cronin** |
| February 2018 | **7.1** | **Updated information regarding geography of training available for foster carers.** | **Rosemarie Cronin** |
| February 2018 | **7.2** | **Updated information regarding the skills to foster training.** | **Rosemarie Cronin** |
| April 2018 | **7.3** | **Insert that social media checks will be undertaken on applicants.** | **Rosemarie Cronin** |
| April 2018 | **7.4** | **Deleted transcript of amended Fostering Regulations but left in reference to them.** | **Rosemarie Cronin** |
| April 2022 | **8.0** | **Various clarifications, amendments, and updates in most sections.** | **Mark Hagon, Corrie Castleman and Elise Lazell** |

# Table of Contents

[About This Document i](#_Toc93001252)

[Version Control ii](#_Toc93001253)

[Table of Contents iii](#_Toc93001254)

[1. Introduction and Legal Framework 1](#_Toc93001255)

[2. Recruitment Policy 3](#_Toc93001256)

[3. Assessment 4](#_Toc93001257)

[4. Medicals 6](#_Toc93001258)

[5. Selection of Foster Carers 6](#_Toc93001259)

[6. Applications to Foster by Essex County Council Staff or Councillors 9](#_Toc93001260)

[7. Transfers from Independent Fostering Agencies or other Local Authorities 9](#_Toc93001261)

[8. Preparation Training 10](#_Toc93001262)

[9. Handover of Applicants to Local Quadrant Fostering Teams Upon Arrival 11](#_Toc93001263)

[10. Training of Approved Foster Carers 11](#_Toc93001264)

[11. Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) 12](#_Toc93001265)

[12. Appendix 1 - Stage 1 & 2: Foster Carer Assessment & Approval Process 13](#_Toc93001266)

[13. Appendix 2 – Information Sheet on Foster Parent & Other Members in the House 14](#_Toc93001267)

# Introduction and Legal Framework

* 1. Essex County Council is committed to providing a range of foster carers to promote the differing needs of the children and young people that we look after. In doing this it is important that foster carers are able to provide a safe and positive environment where children and young people are nurtured and able to develop in a positive way. The role of the foster carer is very skilled, and it is therefore crucial that through the recruitment and assessment process the right carers are approved.
	2. The National Minimum Standards for Fostering 2011 (Standard 13) state:
	3. The local authority fostering service implements an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. Planning for future demands covers the need for short breaks for disabled children.
	4. People who are interested in becoming foster carers are treated fairly, without prejudice, openly and with respect. Enquiries are dealt with courteously and efficiently by staff who have the necessary knowledge and skills. Prospective foster carers are provided with timely and relevant information following their initial enquiry and are kept informed about the progress of any subsequent application for approval.
	5. Prospective foster carers are prepared to become foster carers in a way which addresses, and gives practical techniques to manage, the issues they are likely to encounter and identifies the competencies and strengths they have or need to develop.
	6. The assessment process is set out clearly to prospective foster carers, including:
1. The qualities, skills or aptitudes being sought or to be achieved.
2. The standards to be applied in the assessment.
3. The stages and content of the selection process and where possible timescales involved.
4. The information to be given to applicants.
	1. Checks are carried out in line with regulation 26 and prospective foster carers understand why identity checks, relationship status and health checks, personal references and enquiries are undertaken about them and why enhanced DBS checks are made on them and adult members of their household.
	2. Prospective foster carers are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way that meets the child’s development needs.
	3. The written report on the person’s suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. The reports are accurate, up-to-date and include evidence-based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion, and third-party information. The reports are accurate, up-to-date and include evidence-based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion, and third-party information. The reports are prepared, signed, and dated by the social worker who assessed the prospective foster carer and countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager or a team manager of another of the provider’s fostering teams.
	4. Reviews of foster carers’ approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers’ ongoing suitability to foster.
	5. Areas of concern, or need for additional support, that are identified between reviews are addressed. Such matters identified between reviews are addressed at the time they are identified, where appropriate, rather than waiting for a review.
	6. Regulations 26 and 27 of the Fostering Regulations 2011 (as amended 2013) are also relevant and these documents should be read in conjunction with these regulations.
	7. The Fostering Guidance 2011 also states:

**4.11** The fostering service must not allow a person who is employed by somebody other than the fostering service, but who in the course of their duties may have regular access to children placed by the fostering service, to work for the fostering service unless they are fit to do so according to the criteria applicable to staff directly employed by the service. Reasonable steps must be taken to ensure that any other person working for the fostering service, but not employed by the service, is appropriately supervised during the course of their duties.

**4.12**. Fostering services will wish to make full use of the talents, skills and experiences of their foster carers and members of the fostering household, for instance in delivering training or mentoring or otherwise supporting other foster carers. In considering the suitability of one of its approved foster carers or a member of their household to also work for the fostering service, care must be taken to avoid any actual or perceived conflict of interest or negative impact on foster children, in the same way that any employer needs to be mindful of a conflict of interest within their organisation. For instance, the person may have access to records or may be in a position to influence a placement or approval decision. A conflict may also arise when employing a foster carer elsewhere within the wider organisation if they might have inappropriate influence over matters relating to their fostering task.”

* 1. Paragraphs 5.29 – to 5.38 of the Fostering Guidance have been amended as from 1st July 2013. This includes information regarding stages 1 and 2 of the approval processes and should be read in conjunction with this policy.
	2. A flow chart which summarises the foster carer assessment and approval process is in *Appendix 1* of this document.

# Recruitment Policy

* 1. Essex County Council is committed to recruiting foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the children in Essex who are in need of a fostering placement. Essex County Council will prioritise applications from those prospective foster carers who are most likely to be able to meet the needs of the children.
	2. Essex has a diverse range of recruitment activities to both raise the profile of fostering and reflect the changing needs of the service. Integrated campaigns showcase the transformational power of fostering and encourage people to consider changing a young person’s life with Essex County Council. Campaigns combine Out of Home and Radio advertisement, a PR strategy and digital marketing activities across social media platforms, digital display banners and dynamic audio. Essex has a Communications Recruitment Strategy which is updated annually.
	3. Children and young people in care are involved with the recruitment of foster carers.
	4. Enquiries are made through the Fostering Recruitment Line, Email, Website and social media. There is a clear administrative process for responding to these enquiries. All people making an enquiry about fostering in Essex will be sent an information pack by email within one working day of their contact. Where requested, an initial enquiry worker will initiate contact with applicants within 3 working days to discuss any queries they may have and to undertake some initial screening of applicants. A social worker is allocated to undertake the initial home visit and will then contact applicants within 3 working days. Where possible an existing foster carer also accompanies the assessing social worker on this visit. A visit will take place as soon as is mutually convenient with the applicant.
	5. If prospective carers’ experience and circumstances meet the Department’s criteria and agreement has been reached to proceed, an application form is completed. The application will only be accepted once the skills to foster training has been completed and feedback has been received from trainers. Once the application has been accepted, appropriate checks are undertaken.
	6. The criteria are as follows:
* Carers must have a spare bedroom available for fostered children unless the child is under 2 years of age.
* Carers must not have committed harm or an offence against a child or an offence that could pose risk to a child.
* Carers must not have a child of their own who is currently looked after by Essex County Council or another local authority.
* Applicants must be over 21.
* Carers must not have a child of their own who is subject to a child protection plan.
* Carers must be open to working in a trauma informed and therapeutic way
	1. Relevant Safeguard checks will be undertaken for all applicants. All applicants must give their written consent to checks being made with a wide range of agencies and individuals including (but not limited to) other local authorities, police, former employers, previous partners, and members of their extended families. All applicants will be required to give at least 3 personal referees one of whom will be a family member. They must be able to comment on the potential carer’s capacity to care for children and must be willing to be interviewed. Social media checks should also be undertaken on prospective applicants. If any checks indicate that further information or risk assessment is required, this will be undertaken (for example DBS risk assessment).
	2. If an applicant has been a foster carer in the previous 12 months, and a written reference from their previous fostering service is obtained there is no specific requirement to interview personal referees. However, the fostering service will seek verbal and/or written references from personal referees, should they choose to do so. If no reference is obtained from the previous fostering service, then interviews with 3 personal referees should always be obtained.
	3. Essex County Council will not automatically undertake checks with all these agencies/individuals but reserve the right to do where they deem it necessary. Applicants must reveal any information which may have a bearing on the enquiry and assessment process. Individuals aged 18 years or above living in the applicant’s household must give their consent to checks being made of them. DBS checks will be undertaken for each individual residing in the household or who lives on the premises over the age of 18.

# Assessment

* 1. Prospective carers will undergo a comprehensive assessment in order to assess their suitability to become foster carers. Assessments are undertaken by appropriately qualified and supervised staff who will work sensitively and honestly to gather the information needed. Completed assessments are submitted to the fostering panel for a recommendation of approval which is then presented to the Agency Decision Maker for approval.
	2. The assessment is undertaken in two parts (see *Appendix 2* - Schedule 3 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013). Stage 2 can be completed in parallel with stage 1 of the assessment.
	3. **Stage 1 of the assessment:**

If at any point during stage 1, or within 10 working days of its completion, the fostering service’s decision maker decides that the applicant is not suitable to foster, they must write to the applicant informing them of this decision and give reasons for it. If it is the decision not to continue with the assessment during this timeframe the applicants will be informed that they can complain via the fostering services complaints process if they are unhappy about the way that their case has been handled. The complaints procedure should only address whether the applicant’s case has been handled in a reasonable way and not to question the applicant’s suitability to foster.

* 1. **Stage 2 of the assessment:**

The information for stage 2 of the assessment is set out in Schedule 3 (*Appendix 2*). However, if information comes to light during this part of the assessment which indicates that the applicant is unlikely to be suitable to foster, a ‘brief report’ can be completed setting out the details of the assessment which has been completed and the reasons for considering the applicant as unsuitable. In such situations the applicants must be notified that the brief report is to be sent to the panel, given a copy of the brief report and given 10 working days from the date of notification to send their observations to the fostering service provider. The brief report should be presented to the fostering panel alongside any observations received from the applicant.

* 1. A stage 2 assessment that has been started must be completed unless:
* The assessment is terminated following a brief report.
* The applicant withdraws from the process.
* The applicant is deemed unsuitable as a result of stage 1 of the assessment (where stages 1 and 2 have been carried out in parallel) **or**
* It becomes apparent that the applicant or an adult member of their household has been convicted of, or cautioned for, a specified offence (defined in regulation 26 (6)).
	1. It is expected that the assessment will take place over a 22-week period from the date of the start of stage 2 or the date when the application has been accepted. The Department expects that all prospective carers fully participate in the process of their assessment. The assessing social worker will also need to meet all members of the household and speak with, or meet, any other relevant parties (for example adult children of the applicants no longer living with them). However, the fostering social worker retains professional responsibility for the assessment and, in conjunction with their manager, will decide when the assessment is ready for presentation to panel.
	2. The assessment and approval process will be comprehensive, thorough, and fair. An explanation of the process will be given at each stage of the assessment and of the factors being assessed. If issues arise during the assessment process the fostering service may seek the advice of others (for example, Medical Professionals, Mental Health Coordinator and/or Clinical Psychologist, Agency Panel Advisor, Pet specialist and so on) to inform the decision on how to proceed.
	3. The final assessment will be presented to the fostering panel other than for reasons stated above. All prospective foster carers will be invited to the fostering panel when their case is being heard.
	4. Prospective foster carers will be informed of their rights to make representations and complaints.

# Medicals

* 1. A medical is undertaken in stage 1 of the fostering assessment. This is part of the statutory checks required.
	2. This medical report will be updated every six years or sooner, or more often if there are particular health issues. All medicals will be paid for by Essex County Council.
	3. All health issues will be reviewed by the fostering agency medical advisor who will interpret any medical advice or concerns.

# Selection of Foster Carers

* 1. There are certain criminal convictions which debar a person from becoming a foster carer. Fostering Regulations 2011: (Regulation 26 and Schedule 4 of Fostering Regulations (2011).
	2. In addition, Essex County Council reserves the right not to approve as foster carers anyone who has a child who is currently looked after by Essex County Council or any other local authority.
	3. This would include any applicant who has had recent or ongoing involvement with Social Care where there are child protection concerns.
	4. No applicant will be discriminated against in applying to foster, on the grounds of age, sex, sexuality, gender identity, disability, marital Status, faith, nationality, appearance, or other characteristics. All factors will be taken into account during the assessment process, in considering the applicant’s ability to look after a child in a safe and responsible way. The recruitment, support, and training of foster carers throughout the recruitment process reflects Essex’s commitment to having a range of foster families sufficiently diverse to meet the racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious needs of children and young people requiring placement, as well as any needs relating to disability, gender, religion or sexual orientation.
	5. Essex County Council recognises the impact on health of smoking and passive smoking. Where any carer or member of the household smokes no child under 5 years of age will be placed. (For further information on smoking, please refer to the Smoking Policy for Foster Carers.) Vaping, there is no specific age restriction in relation to fostering. However, please see the Smoking Policy for advice and restrictions in relation to this.
	6. Stability is important for the children and young people that we look after. Therefore, Essex Fostering Service requires that:
* Prospective foster carers, if in a relationship, should normally have been living together for a minimum of 12 months before they can proceed with their fostering application.
* Prospective foster carers should be able to evidence financial stability.
* Prospective foster carers should be living in secure accommodation.
	1. Essex County Council has identified the following positive indicators that we look for in prospective foster carers:
* A special capacity for empathy (rather than sympathy) “to put oneself in the child’s shoes”.
* The capacity to try to understand the child’s experiences and trauma and to begin to make sense of them for the child.
* Some previous experience of children and/ or young people or a willingness to gain this early in the assessment process.
* Evidence that they can understand and manage their own emotional needs.
* Willingness to discuss their own experience of having, or not having, children themselves and the impact of this on their emotional resilience.
* Evidence of capacity to be flexible in their thinking and of their ability to repair relationships.
* Evidence that they have negotiated change well in the past.
* Some indication that conflict has been well managed, for example in family and personal relationships.
* The capacity to accept the child’s history and background and to work positively with the child’s birth family including promotion of family time.
* The recognition that a child placed for fostering will have complex needs due to the trauma they have experienced. Prospective foster carers will need to demonstrate the potential to manage all aspects of these needs and must have a willingness to engage with support and to work as part of a team in the child’s interest.
* A realistic understanding of the impact of being a Child in Care on the child for now and for later in their life.
* A recognition of the potential impact of fostering on their own family relationships and lifestyle.
* A commitment to ongoing self-development and to undertake relevant training as necessary and on an ongoing basis.
* Commitment to complete the Training Support and Development Induction Standards (TSD) within the required timescales,
* Willingness to accept specialist training as identified in the child’s care plan for children with disabilities.
* The capacity to care for a child as an equal and valued member of their family, promote the child’s welfare and value their identity.
* The capacity to meet a child’s health and learning needs and liaise appropriately with relevant professionals and act as an advocate for the child.
* The availability and willingness to attend all appropriate meetings in relation to the child, including a willingness to have meetings, which could include the child’s family, in their own home if this is deemed appropriate.
* Availability and a willingness to transport children to school or contact arrangements if appropriate.
* An ability to maintain regular written records for any child or young person being looked after.
* An ability to work positively as part of the professional team including our in-house Mental Health professionals in the planning for the child and young person and the implementation of the agreed life plan.

# Applications to Foster by Essex County Council Staff or Councillors

* 1. Essex policy will not accept applications from Essex County Councillors or members of staff working within Children and Families for ECC. If an application is received from a County Councillor or a person working for Children and Families, they will be signposted to apply to another fostering service provider.
	2. Our policy allows Essex County Council to recruit foster carers employed by us unless they are a member of staff working in the Children and Families. Applications could be considered if the prospective carer is planning to cease working in Children’s Social Care in Essex after they are approved.
	3. If a member of staff working for Essex County Council wishes to become a foster carer or is a member of a fostering household, care should be taken to avoid any actual or perceived conflict of interest or negative impact on foster children e.g., access to records. Further guidance is included in the Fostering Service Guidance 2011 (4.12). If any potential conflicts were likely then Essex County Council would signpost the interested person to another fostering service provider.

# Transfers from Independent Fostering Agencies or other Local Authorities

* 1. If foster carers who are currently approved foster carers with an independent agency or another Local Authority wish to transfer to Essex an updated assessment will be completed by the assessing social worker. Safeguard Checks may not all need to be updated subject to the foster carer agreeing for the information to be shared and the agency providing the relevant information. However, Essex fostering service reserves the right to undertake any checks they feel are necessary.
	2. **Medicals -** If the foster carer has had a medical in the past 6 years and the Agency is prepared to share the relevant information, a new medical may not be requested unless there are any medical concerns.
	3. **References** - The following safeguard Checks do not need to be completed again if they are within timescale, relevant and of good quality providing that the Agency is prepared to share the information.
* Personal references
* Ex-partner references.
* Employer if there are no changes in employment since the original reference.
* School for birth children if there are no changes in schools since the references were completed.
* Ofsted, probation, LA checks, Health Visitor.
	1. **DBS checks** - These should be completed as part of the application to Essex Fostering Service.
	2. **Health and Safety checks** - These should be undertaken as part of the assessment and application to Essex Fostering Service.
	3. If a foster carer wishing to transfer to the Local Authority already has a child in placement from another local authority, the TRANSFER OF FOSTER CARERS PROTOCOL ENGLAND (2014) (Reviewed 2019) published by [Fostering Network](http://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk) should be adhered to. This includes a meeting to be arranged which includes all relevant parties where consideration can be given to the plans for any children currently in placement and any financial considerations. A member of our recruitment team should attend and Chair this meeting, so all parties can be clear of future arrangements should the carer transfer to the local authority

# Preparation Training

* 1. The preparation training (Skills to Foster Training Programme) is comprised of several sessions which take place over 2 or 3 days. This is a compulsory part of the assessment process. Areas covered include:
* Identity and diversity of background and life chances.
* The context of children coming into care (how and why).
* Attachment, secure base, the impact of trauma and therapeutic parenting.
* Working with others, including the child’s family, and managing family time.
* Safer Caring and record keeping.
* Transitions.
	1. Each applicant must attend this pre-approval training. The aim of this training is to help people make a decision as to whether fostering (and the timing of their application) is right for them as well as prepare and equip prospective carers with some of the skills and understanding needed for the complex task of fostering. The training also forms part of the assessment process and feedback on the applicants from the course leaders will be obtained.
	2. A one-day preparation skills to foster course is provided separately for the children of prospective foster carers, depending upon their age and willingness to attend.
	3. Applicants will also be required to undertake the following on-line modules during the assessment process: First Aid, The Role of the Foster Carer and, if necessary, Child Development.
	4. Further development sessions will be offered to all applicants as a part of the assessment process and the expectation is that they will attend. These are collectively known as ‘Fostering in the Modern World’ and comprise 3 units: Trauma and Brain Development. Online Risks. Gangs, CSE and County Lines.

# Handover of Applicants to Local Quadrant Fostering Teams Upon Arrival

* 1. It is important that this takes place as positively and as smoothly as possible for applicants. Please refer to the Handover and Matching Document (2020) for details of this.

# Training of Approved Foster Carers

* 1. Essex County Council supports continuous professional development and views this as essential to the fostering task. Essex provides a wide range of relevant and in-depth training courses for foster carers in recognition of the complex needs of the children foster carers look after. For details of the current training pathways please see relevant documents, which can be obtained via the Foster Carer Resource Hub: <https://www.essexadoptionandfostering.co.uk/fostering/are-you-a-foster-carer/>
	2. It is an expectation that foster carers will undertake learning and development activities that will help them develop knowledge and skills, which will enhance the work they do as foster carers.
	3. There is a requirement that all foster carers will evidence the Training Support and Development Induction Standards (TSD) and keep their own Personal Development Plan up to date.
	4. Training will be provided in a variety of ways, including face to face training, on-line courses, and remote live modules via video link.
	5. Prospective foster carers are given the opportunity to be matched with an experienced trained foster carer to assist them in their role.

# Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

* 1. All applicants who proceed to stage 2 of the assessment process have the right to access the IRM. This may happen following a brief report being presented to the fostering panel and a decision being made to end the assessment at that stage. It may also happen after a full assessment has been completed and where a recommendation and decision to approve is not made. In both these situations, the applicant can make representation to the Fostering Service Provider through the complaint’s procedure.
	2. Applicants who are notified at any time, but no more than 10 working days after the completion of stage 1, that they are unsuitable to foster (based on full or partial information in stage 1 of the process) do not have access to the IRM but can complain via the fostering services complaints mechanism.

# Appendix 1 - Stage 1 & 2: Foster Carer Assessment & Approval Process



# Appendix 2 – Information Sheet on Foster Parent & Other Members in the House

**SCHEDULE 3 Regulation 26(1A) and (3)**

**Information as to prospective foster parent (“X”) and other members of their household and family**

**PART 1**

1. Full name, address, and date of birth.

2. Details of health (supported by a medical report).

3. Particulars of any other adult members of the household.

4. Particulars of the children in the family, whether or not members of the household, and any other children in the household.

5. Particulars of their accommodation.

6. 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 year’s provider or later years provider under Part 3 of the Childcare Act 2006, including particulars of any previous approval or refusal of approval relating to them or to any other member of the household.

7. If X 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.

8. Names and addresses of two persons who will provide personal references for the prospective foster parent.

9. In relation to the prospective foster parent and any other member of his household who is aged 18 or over, an enhanced criminal record certificate issued under section 113B of the Police Act 1997 which includes suitability information relating to children (within the meaning of section 113BA (2) of that Act).

10. Details of current, and any previous, marriage, civil partnership, or similar relationship.

**PART 2**

11. Details of personality.

12. Religious persuasion, and capacity to care for a child from any particular religious persuasion.

13. Racial origin, cultural and linguistic background, and capacity to care for a child from any particular racial origin or cultural or linguistic background.

14. Past and present employment or occupation, standard of living, leisure activities and interests.

15. Previous experience (if any) of caring for their own and other children.

16. Skills, competence and potential relevant to their capacity to care effectively for a child placed with them.