

Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Policy

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Essex County Council

Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Policy

About this document

Title	Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Policy
Purpose	Policy and guidance for Essex Fostering Services regarding the recruitment, assessment and training for prospective foster carers
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March 2015	5	Section 6 added regarding transfers from IFA's to Essex Fostering Services	Rosemarie Cronin
April 2015	5	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	Updated information from Fostering Network regarding transfers of foster carers	Rosemarie Cronin
February 2018	7	Updated information regarding geography of training available for foster carers	Rosemarie Cronin
February 2018	7	Updated information regarding the skills to foster training	Rosemarie Cronin
April 2018	7	Insert that social media checks will be undertaken on applicants	Rosemarie Cronin
April 2018	7	Deleted transcript of amended Fostering Regulations but left in reference to them.	Rosemarie Cronin

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Introduction and Legal Framework

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.

The National Minimum Standards for Fostering 2011 (Standard 13) state:

13.1) 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.

13.2) 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.

13.3) 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.

13.4) The assessment process is set out clearly to prospective foster carers, including:

- a. the qualities, skills or aptitudes being sought or to be achieved;
- b. the standards to be applied in the assessment;
- c. the stages and content of the selection process and where possible timescales involved;
- d. the information to be given to applicants.

13.5) 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.

13.6) 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.

13.7) 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 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.

13.8) Reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster.

13.9) 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.

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.

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.”

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 process and should be read in conjunction with this policy.

A flow chart which summarises the foster carer assessment and approval process is in appendix 1 of this document.

1. Recruitment Policy

1.1 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.

1.2 Essex has a diverse range of recruitment activities to both raise the profile of fostering and meet the need for placements. Adverts and special interest stories relating to fostering are placed in relevant publications to encourage people to care and foster for Essex. Essex also use social media as a means of recruitment and circulating information. Essex has a Recruitment Communications Strategy which is updated every year.

1.3 Children and young people in care are involved with the recruitment of foster carers. They are actively involved in both recruitment events and the skills to foster training courses.

1.4 All enquiries are made through the Fostering Recruitment Line and 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 within 24 hours of their contact. A duty worker will contact all applicants within 24 hours to discuss any queries applicants 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 on the same day where possible, or within 3 working days of their enquiry where this is requested and where appropriate. 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.

1.5 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 form will only be accepted when the skills to foster training has been completed. Once the application has been received, appropriate checks are undertaken.

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 who is currently looked after by Essex County Council or another local authority
- Applicants must be over 21
- Carers must not have a child who is subject to a child protection plan

1.6 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 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 which will have to 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 will also be undertaken on prospective applicants.

1.7 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 requirement to also interview personal referees. However, the fostering service can seek verbal and/or written references from personal referees; in addition to the fostering service's reference should they choose to do so. If no reference is obtained from the previous fostering service then interviews with 3 personal referees should be obtained.

1.8 Essex County Council will not automatically undertake checks with all these agencies/individuals, but reserve the right to do so in appropriate circumstances. 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 over the age of 18.

2. Assessment

2.1 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.

2.2 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.

Stage 1 of the assessment

If at any stage 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 applicants suitability to foster.

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 these 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.

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))

2.3 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. 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.

2.4 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 and recommendations from the relevant panels as to how the case should proceed.

2.5 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.

2.6 Prospective foster carers will be informed of their rights to make representations and complaints.

3. Medicals

3.1 A medical is undertaken in stage 1 of the fostering assessment. This is part of the statutory checks required.

3.2 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.

3.3 All health issues will be reviewed by the fostering agency medical advisor who will interpret any medical advice or concerns.

4. Selection of Foster Carers

4.1 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))

4.2 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.

4.3 This would include any applicant who has had recent or ongoing involvement with Social Care where there are child protection concerns.

4.4 No one will be discriminated against in applying to foster on the grounds of age, health or other discriminatory factors. All factors will be taken into account during assessment in considering their 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 ethnic, 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.

4.5 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.)

4.6 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 have financial stability.
- Prospective foster carers should be living in stable accommodation.

4.7 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 behaviour and actions and to make sense of them for the child.
- Some previous experience of children and/ or young people.
- Evidence that they can understand and can manage to contain their own emotional needs.
- Evidence, if childless, that they have accepted this in a way which has not marred their capacity to form a relationship.
- Evidence of capacity to be flexible in their thinking.
- Evidence that they have negotiated change well in the past.
- Some indication that “conflict” has been well managed i.e. family and personal relationships.
- Capacity to accept the child’s history and work with the child’s birth family including promotion of contact.
- Recognition that a child placed for fostering will have complex needs. Prospective foster carers will need to demonstrate the potential to manage all aspects of these needs and a willingness to accept support and work as part of a team in the child’s interest.
- A realistic understanding of the impact of being looked after on the child for life.
- Some recognition of the potential impact of fostering on their own family relationships and lifestyle.
- A commitment to self-development and undertaking relevant training as provided by Essex.
- 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 diversity
- The capacity to meet a child’s health and educational needs and liaise appropriately with relevant professionals.
- Availability and a willingness to attend all appropriate meeting in relation to the child, including willingness to have meetings including the child’s parent/s in their own home
- Availability and a willingness to transport children to school or contact arrangements if appropriate.
- An ability to maintain written records for any child or young person being looked after.
- An ability to work as part of the professional team in the care planning for the child and young person and the implementation of the agreed care plan.

5. Applications to Foster by Essex County Council Staff or Councillors

5.1 Essex policy will not accept applications from Essex County Councillors or members of staff working within Family Operations. If an application is received from a County Councillor or a person working for Family Operations, they will be signposted to apply to another fostering service provider.

5.2 Our policy allows Essex County Council to recruit foster carers employed by us unless they are a member of staff working in the Family Operations. Applications could be considered if the prospective carer is planning to cease working in Children's Social Care in Essex after they are approved.

5.3 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.

6. Transfers from Independent Fostering Agencies or other Local Authorities

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. All Safeguard Checks may not necessarily need to be updated subject to the foster carer agreeing for the information to be shared and the agency providing the relevant information.

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 will not be requested unless there are any medical concerns.

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

DBS checks

These should be completed as part of the application to Essex Fostering Service.

Health and Safety checks

These should be undertaken as part of the assessment and application to Essex Fostering Service.

If a foster carer wishing to transfer to the Local Authority already has a child in placement from another local authority the protocol published by Fostering Network 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 also be attending this meeting so all parties can be clear of future arrangements should the carer transfer to the local authority. In addition this Fostering Network published a document on the 'Principles governing transfer of foster carers that was published in 2015'. Up to date versions of these documents can be found on the Fostering Network website (www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk). At the time of writing this document the direct URL is:

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/recruitment-and-retention/transfer-protocols>

7. Preparation Training

7.1 The preparation training (Skills to Foster Training Programme) is comprised of six sessions which take place over 3 days. This is a compulsory part of the assessment process. The course sessions are:

- What do Foster Carers Do?
- Identity and life chances.
- Working with others.
- Safer Caring.
- Understanding and Caring for Children
- Transitions.

7.2 Each applicant has to 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 needed for the complex task of fostering.

A one day preparation skills to foster course is also provided for the children of prospective foster carers.

8. Training for Approved Foster Carers

8.1 Essex County Council supports continuous professional development that is essential to the fostering task and provides quality training courses for foster carers in recognition of the complex needs of the children foster carers look after. A range of free in-depth training is provided. Foster carers are also able to undertake training with social workers in order for each to share skills, knowledge and experience.

8.2 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. This is reflected in the Foster Care Agreement. The Training Programme provided by

Essex includes both Pre-approval and Post- approval training. There is a requirement that all foster carers will evidence the Training Support and Development Induction Standards (TSD).

8.3

Face to face training is usually held centrally (Colchester and Chelmsford) although some courses are available in the quadrant areas. As well as face-to-face training there is a range of on-line courses and distance learning modules that carers can apply for.

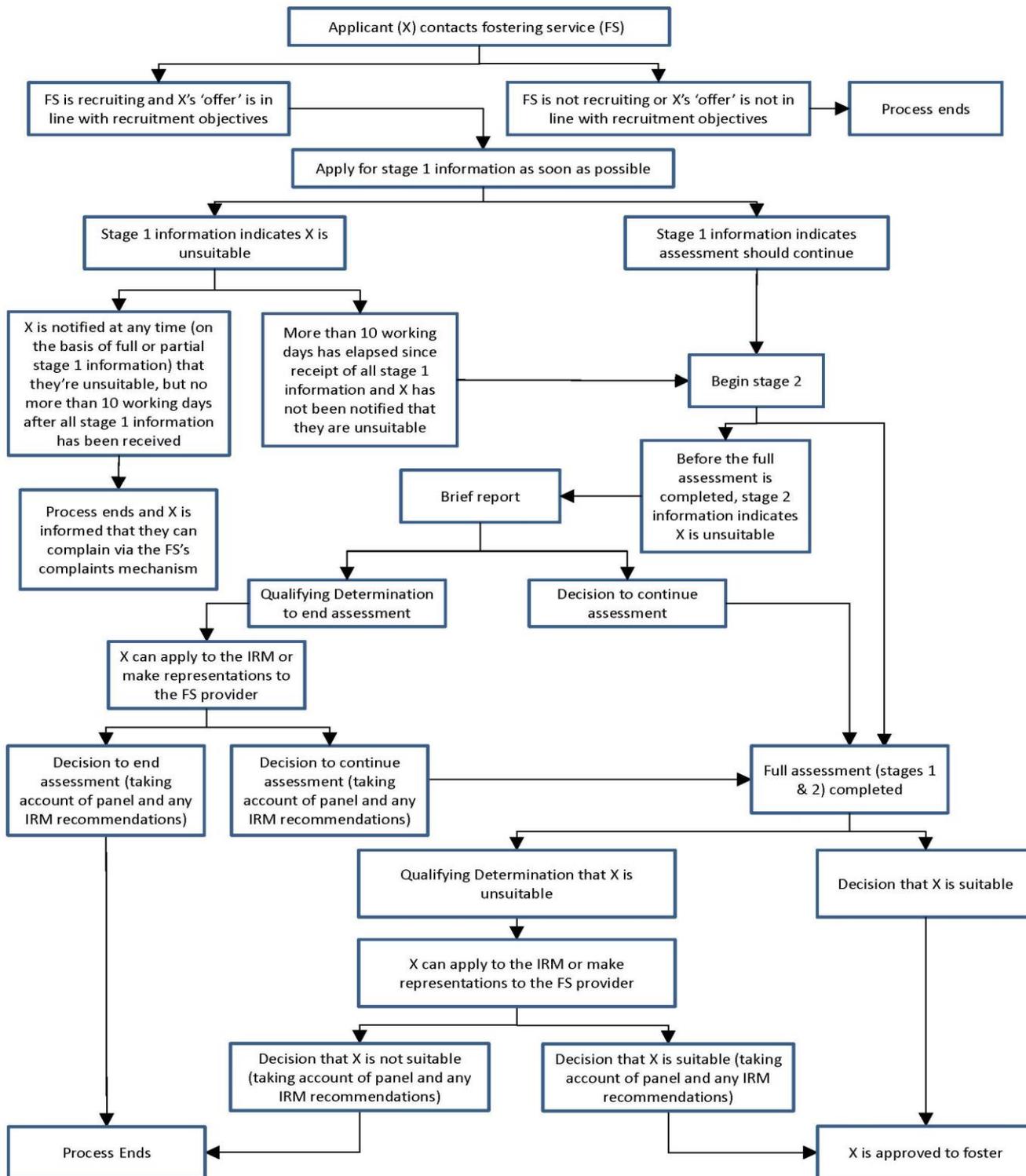
8.4 Newly approved foster carers, or carers with complex cases are given the opportunity to be matched with an experienced trained foster carer to assist them in their role.

9. **Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)**

9.1 All applicants who proceed to stage 2 of the assessment process can have access to the IRM. This may happen following a brief report to the fostering panel if a decision is made to end the assessment at that stage or after the full assessment has been completed. In both of these situations the applicant can also make representations to the Fostering Service Provider through the complaints procedure.

9.2 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.

Stages 1 and 2: Foster carer assessment & approval process



NB - This diagram illustrates how stages 1 & 2 of the assessment process fit together. It is not intended to cover all actions a FS must undertake as part of the process - FSs must refer to the regulations and statutory guidance for this information. It should be noted that at any point in the process applicants (1) can withdraw, in which case the process ends; and (2) can complain to the FS (and must be informed of their right to do so if they are turned down in stage 1).

Appendix 2

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 years 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.