

These Procedures were endorsed by the Suffolk Social Care Leadership Team on 19 March 2003

A Introduction

- 1) These procedures clarify what will be the usual expectations from the Agency including its permanence panels regarding the purpose, range and scope of references and checks for prospective adopters.
- 2) *Adoption social workers are encouraged to share these procedures with potential adopters during the initial enquiry stage.***
- 3) These procedures should be read in the context of “The Policies of the Suffolk Adoption Agency”. These procedures spell out in detail the implications of the policies.
- 4) The implications include:
 - a. putting the need to safeguard children to be placed for adoption first;
 - b. setting out clear criteria for accepting applicants;
 - c. requiring applicants to actively co-operate in the assessment process and provide the required references;
 - d. requiring adoption social workers to make checks and take up references to verify what applicants say about themselves.

B How the Agency balances the need for privacy and disclosure in assessing adoptive parents

- 1) Adoptive applicants like other citizens have a right to privacy under the Human Rights Act 1998.
- 2) This right, however, is qualified by other considerations. An adoption agency can legitimately ask applicants to forgo a degree of privacy where the agency acts in accordance with the law and can show that interference with the applicants’ privacy is “necessary in a democratic society in the interests of the prevention of ... crime, protecting health or morals or protecting the rights and freedoms of others”.
- 3) In this case, those intended to be protected are children being placed for adoption.
- 4) The Policies of the Suffolk Adoption Agency (Section 1.1) state: “We will place the child and their needs at the centre of our activity. In making decisions, children’s welfare and safety shall be paramount”.
- 5) Suffolk Adoption Agency recognises that:
- 6) There have been reported cases where children have suffered harm at the hands of prospective adopters;
- 7) Other situations arise in which adoptive placements disrupt for children for reasons which might have been anticipated at an earlier stage had a more accurate and complete picture of the prospective adopters been available.

- 8) Children placed for adoption are particularly vulnerable to abuse and disruption;
- 9) A great deal of trust is placed in prospective adopters;
- 10) The Agency therefore has a responsibility to be satisfied that prospective adopters are worthy of this trust and have the potential to parent successfully (Policies 4.5.1); As a consequence, the Agency has a duty to verify the key aspects of each person's application.
- 11) As well as safeguarding children, the Agency believes that these steps will do more to safeguard adopters from the pain and disappointment which invariably results from placements where the adopters find themselves unable to meet a child's needs.
- 12) Prospective adopters must, therefore, be made aware of the need for them to co-operate with a thorough assessment process and necessary checks and references. This is one of the minimum criteria for acceptance as adoptive parents (Policies 4.3.1.1).
- 13) In seeking to carry out our legitimate responsibilities for children, the Agency will strive to ensure that:
 1. intrusions into the privacy of prospective adopters can always be directly justified by the legitimate aims of promoting the safety and welfare of vulnerable children in our care,
 2. are not discriminatory and
 3. are proportionate to our purposes.

C The Purposes of references and checks

(Policies 4.3.1.1).

- 1) In attempting to fulfil our general aim to safeguard children's interests we look to references and checks of various kinds:
- 2) To confirm information given by applicants to establish the congruence and trustworthiness of their application (Policies 4.5.6.2).
- 3) To establish their potential to parent children in a way in which their needs are met and they are offered the opportunity of developing secure attachments.
- 4) To ensure that sufficient checks have been made of applicants' histories for each significant stage of their lives.
- 5) Where applicants are in a partnership, to ensure that sufficient checks are made regarding them as individuals and as a partnership.
- 6) To exclude the possibility that they have abused children in the past (Policies 4.3.1.6).
- 7) To exclude the possibility that they have had a history of violence within relationships which is likely to impact upon their ability to meet children's parenting needs in the present (Policies 4.3.1.6).
- 8) To exclude the possibility of substance abuse.
- 9) To establish that the applicants have sufficient financial resources to adopt successfully.

D Requirements for personal references

- 1) Applicants will be asked to nominate 4 referees who have known the applicant(s) for at least 2 years and are not now and never have been family members with a view to evidencing the points mentioned above under purpose of references.
- 2) All of these informants to be asked to complete a questionnaire (see attached at Appendix 1). A minimum of two will be visited and interviewed.
- 3) If during the course of the assessment, it becomes apparent that the referees nominated are insufficient to cover the key areas mentioned above under purpose of references, then the applicants will be asked to nominate further referees.
- 4) In addition, a reference should be sought from :
 - a. At least one family member who is a significant member of the prospective adopters' support system.
 - b. Any ex partners of either applicant. An ex partner is a person with whom the applicant has lived and has had a significant personal relationship. This includes marriage and cohabitation. Partnerships may be heterosexual or same sex. Ex-partners will be asked to complete and return the questionnaire attached at Appendix 2.
- 5) Adult children of any previous relationship will be sent a questionnaire and, where appropriate, interviewed.
- 6) Rather than being seen as referees, children of any previous relationship under 18, if in contact with the applicant who is their parent will have their wishes and feelings explored as part of the assessment.

E The confidentiality, accuracy and relevance of personal references.

- 1) Applicants will not be shown copies of written reference material.
- 2) If, however, significant issues arise as a result of a reference, the Agency will expect to discuss these issues with the applicant as part of the assessment.
- 3) Referees will be advised of this procedure and the importance and significance of their reference before agreeing to complete a questionnaire (see leaflet for referees at Appendix 3).
- 4) The adoption social worker will produce a summary of each interview they conduct with a referee. Each referee who is interviewed will be asked to sign his or her agreement that the summary is an accurate record of the interview. The summary should indicate the date when it was signed.

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- 5) All questionnaires and interview summaries should be attached to the Form F which is presented to the permanence panel.
- 6) The adoption social worker should append their own brief evaluative comments to the questionnaires and references indicating what aspect(s) of the application they believe the reference addresses and how much reliance they place upon it.
- 7) Adoption social workers will take care to seek from ex partners only information which is relevant to the purposes listed above, to evaluate carefully any detrimental comments made, and to place these in the context of the circumstances in which the relationship ended.
- 8) Particular personal references do not go "out of date". However, if the circumstances of an adopter change significantly subsequent to approval and before the proposal of a match with a particular child or children, the social worker should consider whether or not it is necessary to seek an additional reference.

F Other checks and references

*The following **general checks and references** will be required in respect of each applicant. To enable checking and verification, applicants will be asked to give details of addresses from the previous 10 years. Suffolk Social Care staff will return any documents shared for the purposes of checks to the applicant as soon as possible.*

- 1) **Criminal Records Bureau:**
 - Documents required by CRB (passport, driving licence, birth certificate etc) also serve to confirm the identity of the applicant.
 - A CRB check will also be required for any other member of the household over 16 years of age.
- 2) **Suffolk Social Care Department records.**
- 3) **NSPCC** see standard letter FS12 (Appendix 5)
- 4) **CAFCASS.**
- 5) **Probation.**
- 6) **Benefits Agency.** The applicant is asked to provide their National Insurance Number and to authorise the Agency to write to the Benefits Agency to obtain a copy of their contribution record. This should be compared with the applicant's account of their employment history and domicile to check for congruence.
- 7) Applicants' birth, marriage **certificates**/decree absolute where previously married or divorced.

Where an existing child of an applicant is of pre school age:

- 8) **Health Visitor.**

Where an existing child of an applicant is in school:

- 9) **An education reference.** The applicant will be asked to authorise the Agency to approach each child's school. A questionnaire (see Appendix 6) should be sent to the Headteacher focusing upon the applicant's :
- Co-operation with school regarding the education of their child;
 - The applicant's ability to encourage attendance;
 - Any other comments about the applicants' suitability.

In addition, where the applicant has lived elsewhere in the UK:

10) **Other local authority social services departments** in whose area the applicant has previously lived (see standard letter at Appendix 7).

11) **Other agencies in that area** corresponding to those listed elsewhere in section F.

In addition, where the applicant has lived outside the UK:

12) Relevant **international police** and other welfare agency checks.

In addition, where an applicant has served in HM Forces:

13) **SSAFA**

Financial checks. *The adoption social worker should be given access by the applicant to the following information (where applicable) for the preceding three months:*

- 14) Record of income from work;
- 15) Evidence of other sources of income, where appropriate;
- 16) Recent bank statements;
- 17) Deposit and savings accounts statements;
- 18) Mortgage statements;
- 19) Rental statements;
- 20) Hire Purchase agreements;
- 21) Credit card statements;
- 22) Insurance policies.

23) Subsequently, the assessing social worker should include a brief report on the outcome of these checks using the above headings in the written assessment highlighting any area which may be of particular significance to the application (e.g. Is the applicants' income adequate or Low / fluctuating? Are levels of debt or other financial commitment apparently proportionate to the adopters' income and savings or do the applicants seem over-committed? Do the applicants appear to have control over their finances or are there significant issues about budgeting etc.). Financial factors in the assessment have to be placed in the context of all the other information gathered in the assessment process. The assessing social worker then needs to make the best judgement possible in the circumstances as to the effect on the family and any child placed with them of a placement being made.

Employment reference.

24) This is to confirm the applicant's account of their employment status and reliability as an employee. It is of particular relevance when the applicant is employed as a carer for people.

25) The reference should be achieved by the least intrusive method and in close discussion with the applicant.

26) The assessor and the panel should adopt a flexible approach to requests from applicant about the timing of employment references where this may have repercussions for the applicant's career prospects.

G How the Agency will approach verification issues in individual cases.

27) Adoption agencies rely heavily upon the good will and co-operation of applicants. It is still Agency policy to involve applicants as actively as possible in their own application process and to treat them with care and consideration (Policies 4.5.5 and 4.1.2).

28) The adoption social worker will inform the applicants before the assessment begins that it is normal practice for some visits to be made to their home unannounced both before and after the placement of a child. This is because the social worker needs to gain a sense of how the family functions on a day-to-day basis and whether this is congruent with other assessment information.

29) Since no two adoptive applicants' circumstances are identical, the key issues in each application will vary. The requirements in this procedure must be read in this context and cannot be implemented in a mechanistic way.

30) In each case, it will require skilled professional judgement by the adoption social worker and their supervisor to focus upon the adequacy of verification provided by references concerning the range of relevant issues over the most significant periods in each applicant's life.

31) To assist the social worker to focus their assessment, each applicant will be requested to complete a chronology using the Agency format. The chronology should be attached to their Form F.

32) The aspect of the application about which further information or verification is needed may be a particular incident, a significant period in the applicant's life or a particular issue.

33) The social worker should consider whether the information or verification is best gained by:

- Additional evidence provided by the applicant;
- An additional reference or references;
- Or by other direct verification of key information by the adoption social worker.

34) The adoption social worker will need to be open with the applicant at each stage to explain what aspects of the application, if any, require further verification. The worker should give reasons to the applicant which make sense in terms of these procedures and explain how it is proposed to seek the additional information required.

35) Assessing social workers must take all reasonable steps to obtain or verify information that they and their supervisor identify as particularly significant.

36) In each individual case where applicants are unable or unwilling to satisfy all of the requirements described in this procedure, the social worker and their supervisor must consider whether additional information or verification on a particular issue or aspect of an application can be obtained from another source.

37) Where the social worker has been unable to obtain or verify information they consider significant they should make clear in the Form F what steps have been taken to obtain the information.

38) The adoption social worker must also record their professional advice to the panel in the Form F as to the significance of any identified deficit in the light of the balance and quality of all the information gathered in the course of the assessment.

39) This flexibility of approach does not mean that applications should be allowed to proceed where there are serious issues which cast significant doubt on an individual's or couple's ability to satisfy the Agency's minimum criteria associated with a lack of key verifying information. If such doubts arise at an early stage, the social worker and their supervisor should consider whether to seek the view of the permanence panel on the matter (Policies 4.2.4).

H Resolving uncertainties in the assessment process

40) "Second opinion" reports will **not** routinely be provided with every Form F submitted to Panel.

41) On occasions, the assessing social worker may be unable to reach a clear recommendation as required in the Policies (4.5.6) about the applicant's suitability either because of issues relating to checks and references or for any other reason. In that case, the social care manager should consider whether to commission a second opinion report to be appended to the form F and shared with the applicant in the usual way.

42) The report may be prepared by the social care manager, another member of the adoption team or by any other professional deemed relevant by the social care manager. The report should address the issues specifically identified by the assessing social worker and the social care manager.

43) The applicant should be made aware of the process and the scope of the issues that the reporter will wish to explore.

I Transitional arrangements and inter agency placements

44) Suffolk adoptive applicants who have commenced their assessment before this procedure was introduced will not be subject to its requirements. The only exception is where there is some particular reason for uncertainty that the applicant can meet the Agency's minimum criteria (*Policies 4.3.1*). If this should arise, the issue should be addressed by whatever additional checks and references are considered appropriate to the circumstances.

45) Suffolk permanence panels will not require that adopters approved by other adoption agencies who are proposed to be matched with any Suffolk child should have routinely undergone all the references and checks required by these procedures. Instead, the agency and the panels should be satisfied that checks and references on applicants have been taken up in line with that agency's policies and procedures and that there are no serious concerns about the suitability and safety of the adopters, which have not already been assessed and resolved.

46) If it appears to the panel that this is not the case, then the panel must put the child's interests first (*Policies 1.1*). The panel should recommend that consideration of the match should be deferred to allow the agency concerned to consider whether or not they agree to gather further information by means of reference, checks or other means to address the concern.

20 March 2003

(updated 5 September 2005)