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# Information about foster carers provided for matching purposes

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## Introduction

Matching is the process of identifying the most appropriate foster carers for a child and facilitating the placement. Ensuring good matches between foster families and children is crucial for the stability of children in care, as well as for the wellbeing of foster carers and their families. Good matches promote stability and minimise disruptions. Stability is a fundamental principle of foster care practice, as this promotes positive attachments and is linked with better outcomes for children.

A search for an independent fostering agency (IFA) foster family will commence with a local authority sending a placement request to all eligible IFAs. This request should contain accurate and up to date information about the child, as well as the child's views and wishes. The request should state the type of placement that is needed, the intended purpose of the placement, the timescales, key criteria and what outcomes the partnership hopes to achieve.

[\(see NAFP briefing on placement referral forms\)](#)

On receipt of a placement request, an IFA will consider if they have a foster carer with an appropriate vacancy who could potentially meet the child's needs. If a potential carer is identified, the provider will reply to the local authority, with information about the proposed carer, to aid the authority in deciding whether or not the carer will be a suitable match for the child.

The National Minimum Standards for Fostering 2011 (England) describe matching under Standard 15 as *"The responsible authority has information and support from the fostering service which it needs to facilitate an appropriate match between the carer and child, capable of meeting the child's needs and consistent with the wishes and feelings of the child, so maximising the likelihood of a stable placement"*.

## Sharing the right information is important

### To enable an effective match

The information provided to local authorities about IFA foster carers needs to be sufficient and detailed enough to enable an effective matching exercise to take place. It has long been common practice for IFAs to share a carer's fostering assessment report. Over time, it has become increasingly recognised that this is not an appropriate document to use for the purpose of matching.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the fostering assessment is to enable a fostering service to identify whether an applicant, or applicants, is/are suitable to be approved as a foster carer(s), to determine the kind of fostering for which they are suited, and to consider their specific terms of approval. The fostering assessment report provides evidence to fostering panels and to fostering service agency decision makers. A further purpose of the fostering assessment report is to include details of the support provided to applicants to prepare them to foster and to identify any further support and training that they might need.

A fostering assessment report is created prior to a foster carer's approval. It will therefore not include details about their fostering journey once approved, nor any training they may undertake in their role, their achievements whilst fostering and any areas identified for improvement during their time fostering. It is therefore not a document that is suited to consider the appropriateness of a match between a foster carer and a child.

### To ensure that personal and sensitive information is managed and shared appropriately and lawfully

#### UK General Data Protection Regulation (2018)

require that everyone responsible for using personal data follows strict rules called 'data protection principles'. They must make sure the information is:

- used fairly, lawfully and transparently
- used for specified, explicit purposes
- used in a way that is adequate, relevant and limited to only what is necessary
- accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date
- kept for no longer than is necessary
- handled in a way that ensures appropriate security, including protection against unlawful or unauthorised processing, access, loss, destruction or damage

If an IFA shares a fostering assessment report with a local authority, the IFA, as data controller, must be able to demonstrate compliance with the GDPR. In effect this means that the IFA must ensure that the local authority has robust arrangements in place to comply with the above GDPR requirements. There would also be a need to ensure that any third parties named in a fostering assessment report had also given consent for their personal sensitive information to be shared. In addition to the challenges in complying with the regulations, the carer assessment report is not a document that is fit for matching purposes (as outlined above) and it should not be shared or used for this purpose.

<sup>1</sup> In this briefing, we talk about 'the fostering assessment report', rather than refer to the 'Form F'. The Form F is a commercial report template designed by CoramBAAF for capturing information on an applicant to foster for the purpose of a comprehensive assessment. This template has been around in one form or another for decades, regularly revised and updated, and now known as the Prospective Foster Carer Report (Form F)<sup>1</sup>. However, though the Form F is frequently used in the assessment of applicants to foster, the relevant legislation does not prescribe the format of assessments. Other assessment forms are also in use by fostering agencies.

CoramBAAF advise the following with regards to the purpose of their Form F (fostering assessment report):

*“It is important to be very clear that Form F is not designed as a matching tool to be routinely shared with those who are commissioning placements. It was never designed for this purpose although we know in practice that it is often used that way. The information contained within Form F may be very personal and not relevant in considering whether someone is a good match for a particular child. In some cases it will contain information about third parties, such as a foster carer stating that they were sexually abused by a particular person such as a relative. It would be wrong for that information to be shared with commissioners. Information about a person’s previous gender may also be included in the form, and disclosing that information might be an offence under the Gender Recognition Act 2004. We therefore advise that fostering services do not share the Form F with commissioning services, and if they do, to be very careful in making sure all information that should not be shared, has been redacted.”*

[Sample CoramBAAF Form F \(pg 3\)](#)

## **To guard against any negative impact on recruitment and retention**

The fostering assessment is a detailed, searching and thorough process. It considers the applicant’s family and origins, relationships with parents and siblings, religion, child and adulthood experiences as well as any previous relationships and ex-partners.

It is understandable that applicants may feel anxious about some issues from their past coming up during the assessment process. For example, if applicants have been previously married or have children with an ex-partner, the assessing social worker is required to contact them, which some applicants can find intrusive. Some applicants may have undergone private and sensitive medical procedures in the past. Others may have spent convictions<sup>2</sup> for low level crimes that occurred many years ago. It is necessary and right for the fostering assessment to cover these sensitive, personal and private issues.

Applicants should understand and appreciate that a fostering panel must have sight of a comprehensive assessment report in order to reach a decision about their suitability to foster. However, it is still important to acknowledge that some applicants, understanding that their assessing social worker and fostering panel need to have sight of their full assessment, may feel strongly about their sensitive and private information being seen by individuals outside of these roles. Potential foster carers may lack confidence in how their personal information will be managed and stored. Some may feel so concerned about the safety of their personal information that it may deter them from fostering altogether. Having clearer protocols and procedures relating to how prospective foster carers’ information will be shared, and under what circumstances, is likely to have a positive impact on recruitment efforts and contribute to foster carers feeling valued and respected.

<sup>2</sup> A spent conviction is a criminal conviction that, under the [Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974](#), can be treated as ‘spent’ after a certain length of time.

## The risk of redacting fostering assessment reports and foster carer annual reviews

Redacting some information on fostering assessment reports and annual reviews can mean that local authorities and providers are legally compliant with GDPR legislation. It can also offer carers and third parties reassurance that some personal and private information will not be made available to those without need to know. However, whilst this may be legally compliant, a redacted fostering assessment report or annual review can be difficult to understand and may lead to further questions being asked, wasting valuable time in the placement process. A redacted version of a fostering assessment report or annual review often does not provide a child's social worker with the information they need and neither of these documents have been designed for the purpose of matching.

In England, Scotland and Wales, a review of foster carers' approval must take place within 12 months of the day of approval. Thereafter, legislation across nations differs slightly, but it is commonplace for fostering services to undertake an annual review of each fostering household. A written report is created at each review and is shared with the fostering panel. The report will include a review of the terms of approval, details and outcomes of any allegations or concerns, any health issues and changes in personal circumstances. It will also include the views of any children cared for and the views of children's social workers. Annual reviews may contain personal and private information, including that of third parties (who may be children),

which should not be disclosed outside of the fostering panel. These documents, like fostering assessment reports, have not been designed with the intention that they be used for matching purposes. The risks identified above should be carefully considered when sharing a redacted copy of an annual review with a placing local authority.

## Local government contract/ procurement requirements

Some foster care commissioning contracts between local authorities and IFAs (the arrangements under which placements are made) may include a clause requiring IFAs to provide a copy of the fostering assessment report whenever an IFA responds to a placement request with information on a foster carer(s) who may be a potential match. Whilst the sharing of fostering assessment reports has become common practice for matching exercises, this does not necessarily mean it has been good practice to do so. The requirements detailed in contracts may precede the 2018 GDPR and may now need to be amended.

There is no legal or regulatory requirement for local authorities to obtain an IFA fostering assessment report in order to match and place a child with an IFA foster carer. This is also the case if an IFA foster carer is being considered for permanence. It is important to recognise that a local authority does not need to question the suitability for someone to foster, as this robust process has already taken place through the fostering approval process, and regulated by national inspectorates. Therefore, all references, checks and terms of approval will have already been completed. Thereafter the local authority will only need to be concerned with considering if the carer has the right skills, qualities and experience to meet the particular child's needs.

Contracts should not include any requirement for IFAs to share carer assessment reports with placing local authorities as part of a tender qualification process, a matching exercise, a monitoring exercise or to reach a decision on permanence.

## Carer profiles

In the absence of a fostering assessment report, local authorities understandably need a comprehensive document that will provide a child's social worker with all the information necessary to determine whether or not a proposed foster carer is a suitable match for a child. It is increasingly common for IFAs to produce a carer profile for each fostering household. The purpose of a carer profile is to provide placing local authorities with a basic biography of the carers along with up to date information and details of their skills, knowledge, experience and any areas for development. Its primary purpose is to aid family finding and matching. The carer profile is significant as it captures important aspects of the foster carer(s) and their potential to meet the needs of children in care.

This guidance does not prescribe the approach that IFAs should take in producing their carer profiles and either of the approaches described below can work well. In general, IFAs adopt one of two approaches when providing carer information to local authorities to inform the matching process.

1. Producing a carer profile for the child's social worker and placement officer which contains all the information listed below (a-o)  
Producing a separate 'welcome pack' for the child which contains information most relevant to and wanted by children (listed in a-e)

Or

2. Producing a basic foster carer profile, written for children, yet also relevant and helpful to social workers and placement officers to enable them to consider if the carers could be a potential match (listed in a-e)  
Producing separate supplementary

information which helps the social worker and placement team to make a final decision on the match (f-o); this supplementary document may not necessarily be shared with the child (this decision being dependent on their age and understanding)

In the NAFP workshops that were facilitated to produce this guidance, there was a general consensus by both local authority and IFA staff that the following information should be provided when carers are first proposed as a potential match. Also, that this information should be written in such a way that it is accessible to children, social workers and placement officers:

- a. A child friendly carer biography (name(s) of carers, ages, ethnicity, religion, personality, hobbies, interests)
- b. The area in which the carers live
- c. Description of the home and surrounding area
- d. Other members of the fostering household (including pets) and any regular visitors to the home
- e. A child friendly version of the carer's fostering journey

Local authority placement teams and social workers shared that having initial access to a child-friendly foster carer profile, particularly with photographs and/or links to videos, can be a quick and effective way for both children and professionals to identify if the proposed carers are a potential match. It is helpful if carer profiles include pictures of the carers, pets, the home, garden and the local community, including places where the child is likely to frequent (a local shop or park for example). Including links to any videos can be beneficial to help a child choose their care placement and/or

feel better prepared to meet their carers.

One message shared by some professionals and care experienced people is the need for children to be appropriately supported when information about prospective carers is shared with them. Careful thought should be given as to who is best placed to accompany the child when they look at a carer profile. This may be the child's social worker, their current foster carer, a family member or significant other. It is important that this decision is made considering the wishes and feelings of the individual child. There may be times when a child will need to move in an emergency and the child's preferred adult may not be available at this time to support them. Nevertheless, it is still important that the best suited adult takes time to support the child to alleviate some of the anxiety they will be feeling.

Understandably, there may be information within carer profiles that children may find irrelevant or which may overwhelm them. This may, however, be essential information for the child's social worker or placement officer to further consider the potential match and could include:

- f. Date foster carer was first approved and number of years fostering
- g. Foster carer's approval terms
- h. Brief summary of previous placements and outcomes, including experience of supporting adoption or reunification plans within the bounds of appropriate confidentiality
- i. Date of most recent review
- j. Summary of review findings, particular strengths and areas for development
- k. Experience of supporting children with specific needs
- l. What training (particularly specialist) the foster carer has undertaken
- m. Any other commitments, limitations or factors

- that may impact on their ability to foster
- n. Support available from their wider network (family, friends, relief carers)
- o. A statement confirming that all necessary and relevant health and safety checks and insurances are in place and up to date

To be purposeful and relevant, the carer profile should be considered a live document, and be updated at the time of the annual review and whenever there is a significant change. This could be in relation to training, newly acquired skills and experiences, moving home, transitions of children, additional therapeutic parenting and working with birth parents or other reasons. The IFA supervising social worker should work with the foster carer to maintain a good quality carer profile that provides a fair, accurate and up to date picture of the foster carers and which reflects their strengths and limitations.

On occasion, an IFA may wish to send further information to the local authority explaining why they believe a specific carer(s) may be a good match for a particular child. This additional information can help the matching process, but IFAs should ensure that they have the consent of the carers and any third parties to share this further information.

If an IFA feels that their carer(s) could potentially be a good match for a child, but that specific support or resource is needed to meet the child's specific needs, this should be highlighted to the authority when responding to a referral. For example, if the carer would need additional support to facilitate regular and positive time between the child and family members, or if the carer would need training to meet a specific health or medical need.



## Summary

In the process of seeking views from local authorities and IFAs to inform this guidance, it became apparent that, across the UK, local authorities and IFAs have developed variable arrangements for undertaking and recording the matching process and rationale for decisions. There was an overwhelming view shared that the local authority and IFA should jointly make the decision about the appropriateness of a carer-child match and ensure that the reasons for this are recorded and kept on file. This guidance, in no way, sets out to prescribe how the matching process should take place and the responsibilities for this.

The primary aim of this guidance is to help both local authorities and IFAs to be mindful of their responsibilities and arrangements when sharing information about foster carers. When a local authority chooses to decline the offer of a placement, their feedback can help the IFA to consider what measures can be taken to increase the possibility of a positive match with the carer when a future referral is received. For example, if additional or specific training could help them be more prepared for other children in the future. If the carer profile itself is unclear and needs reviewing, this can be facilitated. Informing carers of the reasons for unsuccessful matches is something that is valued by carers and this constructive feedback can contribute to increasing carer morale and retention.

## Useful links

[Matching in Foster Care \(Ofsted 2020\)](#)

[GDPR - a guide for independent and voluntary sector fostering providers \(NAFP 2018\)](#)

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