

HEALTH AND SAFETY ASSESSMENTS ON FOSTER HOMES

Guidance for Social Workers on Completing Health and Safety Assessments on Foster Homes

Introduction

This guidance has been produced to provide social workers and Panel members with a framework within which to consider health and safety issues when considering an assessment of a potential foster carer or when carrying out a review of the carer's registration.

Assessing and supervising social workers should satisfy themselves that each individual applicant's/carer's accommodation is suitable to enable the applicant/carer to provide safe and stimulating care. In reaching such a decision, a number of factors will need to be taken into account, not least the age, gender and numbers of children proposed to be fostered. What may be appropriate for someone who is proposing to foster one baby for pre-adoptive placements may not be appropriate for someone who is proposing to care for teenagers through to independence. These guidelines should therefore be considered afresh for each new application/review rather than applying a rigid minimum standard for all applicants/carers.

Panel members should ensure that they are satisfied with any steps taken to address issues raised by the health and safety assessment and that any risks identified have been minimised to the extent that the foster home provides a safe environment for children. It is to be hoped that assessments will not be brought to Panel were there is clearly a major contra-indication in this regard.

The agency decision-maker will also need to satisfy her or himself that the assessing social worker and Panel have considered the relevant issues arising from this guidance for each application/review.

This guidance should be read alongside the separate Guidance on Minimum Space Requirements for Foster Placements.

Statutory framework

Fostering services are required by Fostering Services Regulations 2011 to obtain the information listed in Schedule 3 of these regulations before considering whether the applicant is suitable to act as a foster carer and that their household is suitable for any child in respect of which approval may be given. This includes details of the applicant's accommodation.

The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services require that the home and immediate environment are free of avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm and contain safety barriers and equipment appropriate to the child's age, development and level of ability .

The National Minimum Standards for fostering services requires the foster home is inspected annually to make sure that it meets the needs of foster children.

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References are made to other relevant standards at appropriate points throughout this document.

Foster Care Link's Policy

Foster Care Link have produced an assessment tool for social workers in the shape of the form attached as Appendix A. This must be completed by assessing/supervising social workers at the following times:

- During the assessment of potential carers, prior to the presentation of the application to Panel. A copy of the completed health and safety assessment form must be attached to the completed Form F
- When carrying out the annual review of the carer's registration. The health and safety assessment form must be attached to the completed annual review form
- Whenever a carer moves house or carries out major structural works or other changes to their existing property and it's immediate environment
- Where there are major changes to the immediate environment surrounding the home, for example new building works or the creation of a new road (in such circumstances it will only be necessary to complete the relevant sections of the assessment)
- Whenever the carer changes their car (in such circumstances it will only be necessary to complete the relevant sections of the assessment)

Completion of Health and Safety Assessments for Potential Foster Carers

Assessing social workers should ensure that they inspect the applicant's accommodation during the first visit and pay particular attention to the proposed sleeping arrangements for foster children. If there are obvious hazards the social worker will need to discuss these with the applicants and consider:

- Whether the accommodation is unsuitable for any foster child
- Whether the accommodation is unsuitable for the type or numbers of child proposed to be fostered (age, gender, disability)
- If the application is in respect of a specific child, whether the contra-indications are likely to be outweighed by other factors such as the carer's relationship to the proposed foster child or the need to keep siblings together
- Whether changes and adaptations can be made that will make the accommodation suitable and safe

If the assessing social worker remains in any doubt about the suitability of the accommodation they should discuss this with their supervisor before proceeding with the assessment. If necessary, guidance should be sought from the Panel.

If there are no immediate concerns and an application proceeds to full assessment then at some point during this assessment, the social worker should carry out a thorough risk assessment and complete the health and safety assessment form. This should be an open exercise fully involving the applicant in the process, but it is the social worker's assessment that must be recorded.

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If there are concerns arising from this exercise, these should be fully discussed with the applicants and there will be a need to consider the issues identified above. The weight to be given to specific concerns will need to be considered and if necessary the social worker should ask the applicant to take corrective action before the case is presented to Panel.

If the social worker continues to feel that there are unacceptable risks to any potential foster child then these should be discussed with their supervisor and if necessary advice sought from the Panel and/or agency decision-maker.

If these risks cannot be addressed to the satisfaction of the social worker, the Panel, or the agency decision-maker, then the application should be turned down. Staff should be mindful however of the applicant's right to make further representation before such a decision is reached if Panel has considered the case.

Completion of Health and Safety Assessments for Existing Foster Carers

Supervising social workers should be mindful of the need to keep health and safety issues under consideration throughout the carer's fostering career. The points at which a full risk assessment should be completed are detailed in the policy statement above.

As with applicant's, the process should be an open one with carers being fully involved, but it is the supervising social worker's responsibility to complete the form and attach this to the carer's annual review of registration.

If there are concerns arising from this exercise, these should be fully discussed with the carers. The weight to be given to specific concerns will need to be considered and if necessary the social worker should ask the carers to take corrective action before the completion of the annual review.

If the social worker continues to feel that there are unacceptable risks to any potential foster child then these should be discussed with their supervisor and if necessary advice sought from the Panel and/or agency decision-maker.

If these risks cannot be addressed to the satisfaction of the social worker, the Panel, or the agency decision maker, then consideration will need to be given to terminating the approval of the carer. Such cases must always be presented to Panel and the agency decision-maker must give the carer the opportunity to make further representations in accordance with the procedure for terminating the approval of foster carers (see separate guidance).

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General Guidance

Context

Nearly half of all childhood accidental injuries occur at home and in the garden. The Royal Society for the prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) February 2017 report states that;

- *On average 65 children under 5 years of age die each year from accidents*
- *over two million children under 15 visited hospital with accidental injuries that had happened at home*
- *nearly 31 ,000 of children injured accidentally at home were under 5 years old*

Falls account for almost a quarter of all home accidental injuries to children. They are the most common single cause of home accidental injury.

Collisions with a person or object are the second most common type of accidental home injury and the only one where the injury rates are approximately the same for children of all ages. Typically these injuries happen when children run into objects, run into each other or are struck by a falling object.

Burns and scalds are the third most common type of home injury. Burns and scalds particularly affect babies and very young children with scalds from hot drinks being the most common cause.

The fourth most common reason for children being taken to hospital is suspected poisonings. These happen when parents or carers think that children have consumed medicines, household cleaners, DIY or gardening chemicals. Nine in ten suspected poisonings involve children under 5 years old.

Most accidents happen in the lounge/living/dining room – probably reflecting where children spend most of their time. The next most common places in the home for accidents to happen are: the kitchen, bedroom and stairs.

Young children are not able to assess risk for themselves. They also have poor co-ordination and balance and need to touch and explore to learn about the world around them. As children get older they learn new skills and begin to understand what they are able to do safely but need to test out their new abilities and to feel that they are taking some risks. These factors all mean that children are particularly vulnerable to accidents in the home.

Children grow and learn new skills rapidly. It is important that the adults who care for them know what risks each stage brings. It is impossible to ‘childproof’ a home but knowledge of the potential for accidents and of effective safety measures can reduce the risk of serious injury.

Extracted from the Child Accident Prevention Trust factsheet on home accidents.

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The Risks to Foster Children

There are a number of reasons why children in foster care are particularly at risk of accidents.

Carer's own children will be aware of the potential hazards in their house, as they will have grown up with them. Most foster children joining the household will wish to investigate their new surroundings and the absence of good safety measures will increase the risk of injury.

Some foster children will be developmentally immature and if this is not taken into account and assumptions are made about their abilities, they are likely to be more at risk from similar hazards than their peers.

Others will not have received appropriate guidance in this area from their own parents and will be unaware of potential dangers.

A smaller but not insignificant number will have a tendency to self-harm and particular attention will be needed to minimising the potential risk to such children.

Completing the Health and Safety Assessment Form

It is not possible to address every question asked on the form in this document, but assessing and supervising social workers may find the following guidance helpful:

- The form should be completed with the applicant/carer but by the assessing/supervising social worker
- The applicant(s)/carer(s) and assessing/supervising social worker must sign and date the form
- Social workers should satisfy themselves that issues have been fully addressed rather than rely on the applicant/carer eg social workers should witness a test of fitted smoke alarms
- Social workers should see any relevant documentation for themselves, such as firearm, MOT and motor insurance certificates. Social workers should record on the form the date these were seen
- Social workers carrying out risk assessments should be mindful of the ages and likely abilities of children to be placed and view any potential hazards through the eyes of the child

Safe caring guidelines

All carers are required to produce safe caring guidelines for their home and these must be approved by every placing social worker and explained to the foster child.

Assessing and supervising social workers should consider with applicants and approved carers the implications arising for these from health and safety risk assessments.

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Foster Carer Training

Fostering services are required to ensure that foster carer's preparation and training cover health and safety issues and the carer is provided with written guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. These are contained within the Foster Carer Handbook and further information can be obtained from the organisations detailed below.

Supervising social workers should ensure that they pay attention to the training needs of carers and other members of their household, addressing these in the appraisal of training and development needs which must be documented in the annual review report.

Social workers should encourage carers to make use of any available training opportunities run by Foster Care Link or external agencies.

Further Information

There are a number of organisations that produce advice on home safety. Details of two of the most useful are reproduced below.

Child Accident Prevention Trust
4th Floor
18-20 Farringdon Lane
London
EC1R 3HA

Tel: 020 76083828 www.capt.org.uk

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents
Edgbaston Park
353 Bristol Road
Edgbaston
Birmingham
B5 7ST

Tel: 0121 2482000 www.rospa.co.uk