

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Fostering for Adoption (FfA) is a recently introduced route to providing permanence for a child who cannot live with their birth family. Prior to FfA being introduced, the majority of children who were first placed for adoption were placed with short-term foster carers once they were removed from their birth family, and remained in foster care till the placement order was made. The exception to this was a small number of children who were placed through specialist schemes with concurrent carers who would foster them whilst a rehabilitation plan was being attempted; if this was not successful, the carers would go on to adopt the children. Whilst the number of children benefitting from concurrent planning schemes was small, the benefits to the children were recognised as significant – namely, a reduction in the number of moves and delays these babies and young children experienced prior to being placed in their permanent home, and the formation of earlier attachments between the child and their permanent carers.

However, the complexities of concurrent planning meant that there was little increase in the number of children being placed through this route. This led to the development of FfA, which has built on the successes of concurrency and is also seen to open up the possibility of achieving early permanence to a greater number of children.

### THE BEGINNINGS OF FfA LEGISLATION AND PRACTICE GUIDANCE

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In 2012, the Department for Education (DfE) consultation, *Adoption and Fostering: Tackling Delay*, introduced the concept of FfA as a new route to achieving early permanence for children. An update to the *Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review* (DfE, 2013) on 'Temporary approval of prospective adopters as foster carers' was published in May 2013 alongside the Adoption Statutory Guidance (published in July 2013).

Practice guidance on FfA was commissioned from BAAF (now CoramBAAF) by the Coram Centre for Early Permanence, and published in June 2013 (Coram and BAAF, 2013). This guidance was seen as 'a comprehensive first step towards understanding the role that Fostering for Adoption may play in the future and a useful voluntary aid to this emerging area of adoption policy and practice'. It explained 'where

Fostering for Adoption fits into the changing landscape of delivery, the practice implications, and how it shares the same principles of early permanence as concurrent planning'. We have re-used or adapted sections of this original guide where they are still relevant.

There was always an intention that that guidance would be reviewed as policy and practice developed, and that has led to this guide being commissioned from CoramBAAF by Coram as part of their work on early permanence, supported by the DfE Practice and Improvement Fund. The guide's focus is on England and Wales, although the material will be of interest more widely.

Since the original guidance was written, the Children and Families Act 2014 in England has introduced legislation requiring local authorities to consider FfA as part of their care planning for permanence for a child, and provided Statutory Guidance, *Early Permanence Placements and Approval of Prospective Adopters as Foster Carers*, in July 2014. This was later subsumed into the Volume 2 *Care Planning, Placement and Review* statutory guidance issued in 2015. Draft Adoption Statutory Guidance was also published for consultation in 2014 but has not been finalised; where the 2014 version contains updated information that is relevant to this book, that text has been used here.

## USE OF FOCUS GROUPS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

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In writing this guide, we were aware that practice around FfA, dual approval care and concurrent planning, as pathways to pursue early permanence for children in care who may not be able to return to their birth family, has been developing over time. Prior to writing the guide, we held three focus groups in London, Doncaster and Bridgewater, attended by 36 local authorities and 10 voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) to hear about and learn from these agencies about their experiences, the developments they were making in this area of practice, the challenges they were facing, and the ways to overcome these. Some agencies were working together within consortia or, looking forward, within regional adoption agencies (RAAs) to develop their processes; some were part of the Coram Early Permanence subscription service; and others were just working within their own agency to progress FfA and early permanence. Their insights have helped to inform this guide.

In addition, we asked agencies to nominate some families who had adopted through the FfA route to complete a questionnaire about their experiences; in fact, some of those who contacted us had adopted following a concurrent planning placement. Their accounts show how their motivation to adopt developed into an understanding of the benefits to children of early permanence placements, and evidence their strong support for the use of these placements. They also offer

some useful insights into their experiences of providing the fostering placement, give some powerful evidence about the impact on children of contact arrangements, and highlight issues around adoption support for families who adopt through this route. We have used quotes from these questionnaires throughout the book (under coded names), and summaries of the families' situations are given in Appendix 1 to provide context.

*It's the most rewarding thing to do yet it's also a rollercoaster of a ride. It's not always easy, sometimes feeling as if it's never going to happen, but you need to focus and remember that you're doing it because it's the best thing for the child, not for you. As adults, we have the capabilities to cope with loss much better than a child can and it's only right that as adults we take the risks, not the child. (FfA8)*

## TERMINOLOGY AND REMIT OF THIS GUIDE

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During our focus group discussions and in some of the responses from FfA and concurrent carers, we recognised that although current statutory guidance sets out a distinction between concurrent placements and FfA, the experience of agencies is that it is not possible to pre-empt the outcome of care proceedings, even with cases that are initially considered to be very "straightforward". Some agencies have therefore chosen to use the term "early permanence" for all the placements they make through FfA using temporary approval through Reg. 25a or dual approval, and for their concurrent planning placements, and will highlight to prospective carers that every early placement carries a level of risk for the prospective carers that the child may return to the care of a birth family member. These different routes to early permanence are explained further in the next chapter.

When FfA was first introduced, there was a lack of understanding about this new concept, particularly around the fostering aspect of the role, and it was reported that some courts and legal professionals confused this concept with foster carers who wanted to adopt a child for whom they were already caring. Adoption by carers does provide another route to permanence for children of all ages, and it was recommended by Dibben and Howorth (2016) that it is an opportunity that could be extended to a wider number of children in care, but it is not covered here.

## WHAT THIS BOOK COVERS

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In this guide, we set out the development of FfA as a route to early permanence and explore current best policy and practice.

- Chapter 2 explores the historical development of FfA as a route to early permanence.
- Chapter 3 sets out the legal requirements on local authorities when they are care planning for children and identifying FfA carers, and acknowledges the differences between legislation and guidance in England and Wales.
- Chapter 4 looks at which children will benefit from an FfA placement and gives case examples from local authority experience.
- Chapter 5 looks at how practice has been developing and what can lead to good practice in the care planning and placement of children in FfA placements. It also references or signposts agencies to models and resources that have been developed by agencies that have shared their materials with us.
- Chapter 6 covers the recruitment, preparation and assessment of FfA carers and highlights best practice, giving examples of local authority and VAA practice and sharing carers' accounts of their experiences.
- Chapter 7 explores how agencies and FfA carers can manage the period of the fostering placement whilst decisions are being made about the long-term future for the child, including situations where a child returns home. Accounts from FfA carers highlight some of the emotional impacts for them during this period. We examine the areas that need to be considered by agencies when setting up these placements and again highlight the best practice that is developing.
- Chapter 8 considers the further planning that is needed to progress the adoption match once authority to place has been given, in most cases following the conclusion of care proceedings, or once parental consent has been formalised, including the final consideration of the match and the role of the adoption panel.
- Chapter 9 addresses the post-match considerations and how agencies can support the prospective adoptive family through to the making of the adoption order, and what needs to be considered in the provision of adoption support.
- The conclusion sets out a summary of the main learning points for agencies to consider in their development of FfA so that they can identify the children who will most benefit from this route to early permanence and provide the right support to the families who are coming forward to offer an FfA placement.

The Appendices provide relevant tools and information shared with us by several agencies that came to our focus groups, and give a brief outline of the families who have contributed their experiences to help inform adoption agencies and support future potential FfA carers.