

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### THE IMPORTANCE OF CHECKS AND REFERENCES

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The assessment of prospective foster carers and adopters is arguably amongst the most important aspects of family placement work; it is a core task for social workers in this field. Getting the assessment right is essential, as otherwise subsequent work is likely to be fraught with difficulty. It is no surprise therefore that social work practitioners invest considerable time in assessment and preparation.

The legal frameworks in the four countries of the UK set out in some detail what is required in these assessments, and there is a range of practice guidance about the checks and references that are central to effectively assessing foster carers and adopters. Material from the National Foster Care Association (1999) is now somewhat dated, but nevertheless contains valuable guidance; and some statutory guidance that has been withdrawn (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006) is nevertheless still helpful in terms of best practice in undertaking checks and taking up references. Similarly, in Scotland, the Scottish Government in 2005 revised the National Care Standards: Foster care and family placement services, and the National Care Standards: Adoption agencies, which are still of some relevance. These texts are referenced where appropriate in this practice guide.

There are also helpful publications about undertaking assessments using the specific forms that are licensed by CoramBAAF in England (Dibben, 2017; Chapman, 2019), Wales, and Scotland (Chapman and Morrison, 2011). These resources cover in some detail the issues to be addressed in the series of interviews with applicants known as the home study, but are less comprehensive in relation to the accompanying checks and references that are either required by law, or are recognised to be a necessary element of good practice. Extensive guidance notes are also provided with the various fostering and adoption forms across the UK.

This practice guide complements these various publications by focusing specifically on the checks and references that go alongside and inter-relate with the material emerging from the home study. It is important to understand that these cannot be undertaken as entirely separate work

streams, and what emerges from the checks and references should influence the content and direction of discussion with the applicants, and vice versa. This might be about exploring comments made by personal referees, confirming what an applicant has reported about their health, or making sense of why an ex-partner sees things very differently from the applicant. Undertaking other checks – home safety checks or pet assessments, for example – may also be helpful in allowing for reflection and consideration regarding changes in the home that might be necessary or advisable. In that sense, they can also be seen as part of preparing to foster or adopt.

While undertaking checks and references is not only about safeguarding, this does constitute an essential element in ensuring that children are not placed with likely abusers or with those who otherwise cause harm to a child. The vast majority of prospective adopters and foster carers are well intentioned and have benign motivation, but there is a small minority whose behaviour stems from a desire to abuse, or who, for whatever reason, seek to mislead assessors. There are examples within this guide of where a check revealed significant information that would never have come to light if the assessor had relied only on the self-reporting of the prospective carer or parent.

Alyson Leslie (2001) emphasises this very clearly in the report that she authored for Brighton and Hove following the tragic death of John Smith whilst in the care of his prospective adopters. Leslie makes the point that fostering and adoption assessments need to be genuinely investigative, and should triangulate information rather than simply accepting the self-reporting of applicants. In some situations prospective foster carers or adopters will lie, or present information that does not truly or fully reflect the reality of their personality or behaviour. This is why assessments need to include information from a wide range of sources, independently verified wherever possible. A series of thorough checks and references will offer that.

## GENERAL ISSUES

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### **Proof of identity**

For all applicants to foster or adopt, it is essential to ensure that they are who they say they are, and assessing social workers need to check proof of identity before initiating any other checks. If accurate proof of identity has not been obtained, or a name is spelt incorrectly or date of birth inaccurate, then any checks undertaken are likely to be worthless. In practice, this means that the assessor will need to see documents such as birth certificates, passports, marriage certificates, divorce papers and

other evidence to confirm identity. Photographic evidence will be helpful in this regard in the form of passports or UK driving licences.

### **Consent**

It is necessary to ensure that the applicants have given consent to the range of checks that will be made. CoramBAAF publishes a “Consent to checks and references” form that can be used for this purpose (see Appendices).

### **Proportionality**

Checks and references need to be purposeful and meaningful. In writing this guide, it emerged that some fostering services and adoption agencies were undertaking checks that were very unlikely to yield useful information. While it is for individual services and agencies to decide what checks and references to pursue, it is important to concentrate scarce resources on areas of activity that are most likely to produce a thorough and well-informed picture of the applicants.

### **Policies and procedures**

Adoption agencies and fostering services are required to have policies and procedures that set out what is expected within their organisations. This practice guide is not a substitute for those documents, but it may be of assistance in developing a robust, proportionate and well thought out framework for undertaking checks and references.

### **CoramBAAF forms for checks and references**

CoramBAAF has produced a number of resources that can be used for checks and references as part of an assessment using one of their family assessment forms, which are mentioned throughout this guide. The resources are reproduced in the appendices at the end of the book, apart from those for dog and pet assessments, which have already been reproduced in *Dogs and Pets in Fostering and Adoption* (Adams, 2015). The resources can also be viewed in the members’ area of the CoramBAAF website at [www.corambaaf.org.uk](http://www.corambaaf.org.uk). CoramBAAF forms are made available through an electronic licence scheme. For further details, contact the Publications Department on 020 7520 7517 or email [pubs.sales@corambaaf.org.uk](mailto:pubs.sales@corambaaf.org.uk).