



Health and safety assessment for foster carers

This Policy provides fostering social workers and Fostering Panel members with a framework within which to consider health and safety issues when considering an assessment of a potential foster carer and when carrying out a review of the carer's approval.

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 hoped that assessment will not be brought to Panel where major health and safety issues are still outstanding.

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

Statutory Framework

Fostering services are required under Fostering Services Regulations 2011 to obtain the information listed in Schedule 3 of these regulations before considering whether the applicant is suitable to act 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.

STANDARD 10 – Providing a suitable physical environment for the foster child

Outcome:

Children live in foster homes which provide adequate space, to a suitable standard. The child enjoys access to a range of activities which promote his or her development.

10.1) The foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there including where appropriate any suitable aids and adaptations provided and fitted by suitably trained staff when caring for a disabled child.

10.2) The foster home is warm, adequately furnished and decorated, is maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene and is in good order throughout. Outdoor spaces which are part of the premises are safe, secure and well maintained.

10.3) Foster carers are trained in health and safety issues and have guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. Avoidable hazards are removed as is consistent with a family home.

10.4) Foster carers understand the service's policy concerning safety for children in the foster home and in vehicles used to transport foster children. The service's policy is regularly reviewed in line with the most recent guidance from relevant bodies.

10.5) The foster home is inspected annually, without appointment, by the fostering service to make sure that it continues to meet the needs of foster children.

10.6) In the foster home, each child over the age of three should have their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. Before seeking agreement for the sharing of a bedroom, the fostering service provider takes into account any potential for bullying, any history of abuse or abusive behaviour, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts. The decision making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed.

Norfolk County Council's Commitment and Values in Respect of Health and Safety

Norfolk County Council considers health and safety to be an integral part of what we do.

Norfolk County Council Fostering Service is committed to ensure that any looked after child or young person will be placed in a foster home that has been assessed and approved to a standard that is safe for children and young people to live in. These standards should conform to nationally recognised safety standards.

When a child is placed, the responsibility for their everyday safety becomes that of the foster carer. Like any responsible adult, foster carers must take proper care of the child both inside and outside of the home, and with regard to the child's age and understanding, guiding and instructing them in the daily hazards of living. Norfolk County Council expects that foster carers exercise due care "common sense" and if in doubt ask themselves what is reasonable care. If unsure about this the foster carers should ask the guidance of their supervisor and or the child's worker. It is important to positively promote healthy lifestyles and raise awareness of risks.

The Council is also committed to ensure that social work staff which are involved in fostering arrangements are sufficiently experienced and competent to make a professional judgement in connection with the placing of children and young people in a caring home environment.

The Fostering Service will ensure that approved foster carers fulfil the expected competency to provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment.

The assessing social worker will gather evidence to satisfy the fostering panel that the prospective foster carer has an ability to ensure that children are cared for in a home where they are safe from harm or abuse. The Fostering Service will inspect the foster home annually to ensure it can comfortably accommodate all who live there and that it meets health and safety standards.

Supervisory visits to the foster homes will satisfy us those homes are warm, adequately furnished and decorated and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene.

The process will ensure:

- every child placed will have their own bed and the accommodation arrangements will reflect the child's assessed need for privacy and space or for any specific need resulting from a disability and risk assessment. Please refer to Norfolk's guidance around bedroom sharing and risk assessment.
- the foster home and immediate environment are free from avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm and contain safety equipment appropriate to the child's age, development and level of ability.

Where the foster carer is expected to provide transport for the child, it is expected that this transport will be appropriate for the task, the vehicle has a valid MOT, road tax and is insured.

Foster carers are made aware their supervising social worker may interview or visit a carer's home as part of the inspection process.

The Fostering Service has produced an assessment format to be used at the time of the visit to the carer's home, the Health and Safety Checklist. This will be completed by assessing/supervising social workers at the following times:

- During the assessment of potential carers, prior to the application to Panel, a copy of the completed Health and Safety Checklist will form part of the assessment.
- Health and Safety Checklist will be completed annually post approval.
- The Health and Safety Checklist will be updated when a carer moves house or carries out major structural works or other changes to their existing property and its immediate environment.
- The Health and Safety Checklist will be updated when the carer changes their car (in such circumstances it will only be necessary to complete the relevant sections of the assessment).

Health and Safety Assessments for Potential Foster Carers

Assessing social workers should ensure that they inspect the applicant's accommodation and pay particular attention to the proposed sleeping arrangements for foster children. If there are obvious hazards then 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 of child or numbers of children proposed to be fostered (age, gender, disability).
- If the application is in respect to 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 manager before proceeding with the assessment.

If there are no immediate concerns and an application proceeds to full assessment, the social worker should carry out a thorough health and safety assessment, using the Health and Safety Checklist. This should be an open exercise fully involving the applicant in the process.

If the applicants own a dog the Dog Questionnaire must be completed. If there are other pets in the home the Pet Questionnaire must be completed.

If the applicants are gun/fire arms owners the Gun Questionnaire must be completed.

If there are any 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 manager and if necessary advice sought from the Panel and/or agency decision maker.

Health and Safety Assessments for Existing Foster Carer(s)

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

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.

If the social worker continues to feel that there are unacceptable risks to any potential foster child then these should be discussed with their manager and if necessary, advice sort from foster 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 foster carer(s). Such cases must always be presented to the foster 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 carer(s).

General Guidance – Completing the Health and Safety Checklist

It is acknowledged that Fostering Staff are not trained health and safety inspectors, nor indeed are they specialised experts in fields such as electrical or plumbing maintenance. Therefore, the extent to which they are able to apply the Health and Safety Checklist will be determined by their own experience and skills. It is expected that the assessor uses common sense to make appropriate judgements to review the household. If appropriate they may need to seek additional guidance and advice.

There are some health and safety issues which are not covered by this checklist. Such issues will include moving, lifting and handling and behaviour management. These should be dealt with within the usual CLA (Child Looked After) planning and be detailed in an individual risk assessment for each young person.

- 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 this form.

- Social workers should see any relevant documentation for themselves, such as firearm, full UK driving licence, 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.

Foster Carer Training

The Fostering Service is required to ensure that foster carer's preparation and continued training covers health and safety issues and the carer is provided with written guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. The foster carers hand book contains more information on health and safety in the foster home.

Assessing and supervising social workers should ensure that they consider the training needs of carers and other members of their household as part of the assessment and supervision process.

Supervising workers should encourage carer(s) to make use of any available training opportunities run by us or external agencies.

Health and Safety 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 surroundings and the absence of good safety measures will increase the risk of injury.

Many 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 minimise the potential risk to such children.

Further Information on Health and Safety

Further information can be obtained outlining various aspects of health and safety. See for example [RoSPA – The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents - RoSPA](#), [Child Accident Prevention Trust | A safer world for all our children](#) or [Homepage | Food Standards Agency](#).

Car Safety, Seat Belts and Transporting Children

Policy statement – Foster carers should discuss the issue of safe transport with their supervising social worker. Norfolk County Council expects children to be suitably restrained in cars.

The position about potential overloading is often of concern. As far as insurance is concerned, whilst overloading of a vehicle would not necessarily negate cover under a motor insurance policy, it would certainly be considered in the event of an accident, with the possibility of contributory negligence, depending on the circumstances.

Babies and children should always be securely strapped into car seats for every journey, no matter how short. No car ride can ever be completely safe, but if a child is using the right safety restraint, the likelihood of being injured in an accident is substantially reduced.

Carers need to be aware of the legal requirements around use of car seats and use of seat restraints, [Child car seats: the law: Using a child car seat or booster seat - GOV.UK](#) . All car seats must be fitted according to the manufacturers' instruction.

Second-hand car seats should not be used as the protective structure may be invisibly damaged, which could prove fatal in the event of an accident.

- the car seat should be appropriate to the age and size of the child.
- a child must never be carried on the lap of a passenger, even with a seat belt. It is not only illegal, but also highly dangerous, as in the event of a crash the child could be crushed.

Alcohol and Drug/Substance Use

Policy Statement – Norfolk County Council will ensure that foster carers are appropriate role models for looked after children in relation to drinking alcohol. Norfolk County Council expects social workers and foster carers not to be drunk in the charge of any child at any time.

No foster carer should ever be under the influence of illegal drugs or other similar substances.

The use of alcohol by social workers and foster carers in the presence of looked after children should be considered in terms of both positive health promotion, and of the risks associated with intoxication and alcohol abuse. We expect that carers will present themselves as responsible adults and good role models.

Where a carer has a known alcohol/drug problem, supervising social workers and team managers will ensure that the carer seeks appropriate support and help. The foster carers' approval terms will need to be reviewed.

The aim is to give young people the information they need regarding the influence and harmful effects that can arise from consuming alcohol and drugs. Carers will not supply alcohol/drugs to a looked after young person.

It should not be possible for young people to gain access easily to alcohol in the carer's home.

It needs to be remembered that some children will have experienced trauma associated with alcohol and/or drug/substance misuse.

Smoking/Vaping

Over the past few years considerable effort has been made to raise public awareness of the many different and adverse effects of smoking/vaping on health. The responsibility on local authorities is to promote the welfare of any child looked after and therefore to take a proactive approach to ensure that the child's health is safeguarded. Young people under 16 should not be sold cigarettes and tobacco or e-cigarettes. Very young smokers should be encouraged to break the habit.

The rules about when, where and by whom smoking/vaping is allowed in and around the foster home should be very clear and part of any placement plan.

Please see smoking policy.

Pets

Policy statement – Norfolk County Council will ensure compliance with the Dangerous Dogs Act and uphold best practice with regard to care of animals in relation to protecting children who are looked after.

The safety of children fostered in a family with pets must be considered carefully. It is always a possibility that a dog, cat or other animal may attack a child. The animal may be provoked or merely perceive a child as a threat.

Equally, children may feel jealous of pets, resenting their place in the family and can behave spitefully towards them, sometimes when no one is looking. However, pets can help children settle when they move into their new family. Sometimes children feel safe with a dog or cat that doesn't answer back and likes to talk to them and tell them things.

It is important to remember that children's experiences of animals may be very different from those of foster carers' own children and family. They may have seen animals teased and abused and may think that this is an acceptable way to treat them. No matter how docile and relaxed the family pet may be, they may naturally respond angrily to a sudden action from a child that hurts or shocks the family.

There are many benefits for children and young people of living with a pet, they can provide companionship and unconditional affection, promote exercise, enhance self-

esteem, give a level of caring and responsibility to a young person and be fun! However, these positives need to be considered alongside safeguarding elements which are outlined in below, the aim of this section is:

- To safeguard and promote the welfare of the child and to ensure that this is of paramount importance.
- To objectively assess what the risks are for a specific animal and not to make assumptions based on the personal preferences or prejudices of individual members of staff.
- To identify and verify the owner's arrangements for the care of the animal and the extent to which they guard against potential risks.
- To seek evidence from observations and information provided by the owners, supported by evidence wherever possible, that they are responsible in their attitudes and actions as pet/dog owners.
- To identify the owner's intended action if problems around pets were to arise once a child is placed.
- To make it clear to pet/dog owners that the burden of evidence rests with them that their animal presents no serious risk. There may be a need to seek a statement from a qualified Veterinary Surgeon or animal behaviourist concerning the safety of an animal which may be dangerous in the company of children.
- Foster carers will not be approved for the care of children if they own a dog listed as dangerous in legislation, and therefore banned. Further information on banned dogs can be found below **Appendix A: What is a Banned Dog?**

To understand that all animals present potential risks and to ensure that owners have strategies for managing these if and when they arise.

Once approved It is important for foster carers to let their supervising social worker know of any changes in the health or temperament of their pets that may affect the care of a child.

Risk Assessment of Dogs

The general principles to be applied when assessing risk are:

- A child must never be placed in a household with a dog listed in the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (amended in 1997), but with other breeds the approach should be to assess the individual animal's temperament and characteristics, taking into account a variety of issues;
- Although some dogs are defined as "dangerous" in terms of legislation and are banned (see below **Appendix A: What is a Banned Dog?**), it is clear that any dog of whatever breed has the potential to be unpredictable, act on instinct or react to the way it is treated.
- Workers should be cautious about ascribing general characteristics to a breed.

- Workers are not expected to carry out in-depth assessments of dogs, but to complete the Dog Questionnaire for this purpose.
- In addition to the assessment carried out on the animal, it is also important to assess the owners in terms of their ability to control the dog and the practical steps they take to minimise any potential health and safety issues relating to owning a dog.
- If a more detailed assessment is considered required, the worker should consider approaching other organisations for further help. A report from the veterinary surgery used by the owners **may** also be useful. Similarly, if they have used the services of an animal behaviourist, it would be helpful to receive a report.

When should Assessments be Undertaken?

Assessments will be required in the following circumstances:

- Approval of new foster carers
- Whenever a new dog/pet is introduced to the household of prospective foster carers or foster carers who have already been approved.
- Any changes to a dog/pets' behaviours or presentation that could have an impact on a child. Foster carers are responsible for informing their supervising social worker of any changes in relation to their dog/pets behaviours or presentation.

Social Worker's Assessment

Social workers need to make an informed assessment of each animal in the household and to identify the role the dog plays in relation to its owners.

- Is the dog kept as a family pet, working dog, for breeding, guard dog etc?
- Confirm what breed the dog is or what is known of the animal's ancestry if a crossbreed.
- How did the family acquire the dog? (e.g. from a breeder, pet shop, rescue centre etc).
- Older dogs acquired from rescue centres often have a history of neglect, ill treatment or abandonment. This may have affected the dog's behaviour.
- How long has the dog lived with the family? Is this its first home? Dogs with persistent difficulties may have been re-homed more than once. A recently acquired dog may not yet have displayed the problems which led to the re-homing.

- Who looks after the dog and is seen by the dog as "pack leader"? This person will need to be responsible for maintaining the dog's routine as far as possible when family life changes as a result of a child being placed.
- Feeding arrangements - is dog food kept out of reach of a child? Are dog utensils and human utensils kept separately? Is the dog allowed to beg when the humans are eating?
- Sleeping arrangements - where does the dog sleep? For reasons of both hygiene and safety it is not advised the dog sleeps at the end of the child's bed or in the child's bedroom
- Exercise and toileting - how and when is the dog exercised? Where is the dog allowed to relieve itself and what are the "cleaning up" arrangements?
- Physical space - is there enough space within the home and garden to comfortably accommodate the dog/s and child/ren? Which areas are out-of-bounds for dogs? Is there a sign on the property warning visitors of dogs at the home?
- How is the dog's health addressed? Is it vaccinated and wormed regularly? Is it treated for fleas etc regularly? Is the dog insured?
- Does the home appear hygienic and free from the odour of pets?
- Observe how the dog behaves when you visit. Is it overly defensive, nervous or aggressive? Is it excessively friendly, excitable and demanding of attention? How do the owners manage this? Does the dog respond to the owner's commands? How does the owner describe the dog's temperament, its behaviour to other visitors, children, other dogs?
- Has the dog ever bitten any person or other animal, and in what circumstances?
- Clarify the dog's age. Older dogs may find it more difficult to cope with young children running around; younger dogs may still be unruly and boisterous.
- Explore how the family would cope if it became necessary to re-home the dog.
- If the family has more than one dog all the above questions must be asked, but it will also be important to understand how the dogs relate to each other and which is the "pack leader". Greater caution to be applied where there are 2 or more dogs in the home because of the likelihood for a pack instinct to develop and because more than 2 dogs require a great deal of attention and time when looked after appropriately.

Implications for Placement

Social workers also need to encourage potential foster carers to consider the possible issues there may be for a child and to understand the implications for placement. The same issues will need to be considered again more specifically when a possible match is identified.

- Is the child used to dogs? What breed/s?

- Does the child's culture view dogs in a certain light? (e.g. are they considered "unclean"?)
- Does the child have a fear of dogs? All dogs or specific dogs?
- What associations do dogs have for the child?
- Has the child been known to mistreat animals?
- Does the child have any mobility difficulties, known allergies or other health issues which might make it unsafe or unsuitable for them to be placed in a dog-owning household?

Working Dogs and Animals in Rural communities

Where prospective foster carers have working dogs i.e. Police dogs/Farm dogs/Sheep dogs, these must be kept in a secure area where children cannot gain access. The assessing social worker will need to see the area and satisfy themselves that children could not gain access.

A report or letter from the family vet detailing the type of work undertaken by the animal should be referenced and confirmed in the Dog Questionnaire and included in the presentation to the Panel.

Animals/Dogs Kept for Breeding

Households who keep animals for breeding purposes will require individual assessment and not distract from the fostering task. As with working dogs, the assessing social worker will need to be satisfied that the animals are kept in secure, separate areas where children cannot gain access. It is important to note that even the most placid animals can become aggressive when they are protecting their young.

If the foster carer is breeding five dog litters or more the household will need to be formally registered under the Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999.

Horses and other large animals

Horses and other large animals, such as with smaller pets, can provide children and young people with new opportunities and calming/therapeutic support. However, consideration also needs to be given to the risk associated with large animals and how to mitigate this. Children and young people must be protected from any risk as a result of their lack of experience, absence of awareness of existing or potential risks, or lack of maturity. Horse riding is a high-risk activity but handling horses from the ground can be just as dangerous.

As the owner of the animal(s) you are responsible for managing and supporting young people around them and Norfolk Fostering Service advises:

- Sensible clothes and shoes should always be worn when dealing with horses, jewellery removed. A protective riding hat is essential when riding, and a body protector is highly advisable.
- If a child or young person is taking part in caring for the horse; horses should be tied up when being groomed or tacked-up, even in a stable with a head collar.
- At the placement planning meeting the child/young person's social worker is to be made aware of the pets and agreement to the safety measures needed.

Health, Safety and Hygiene

It is important to be aware of the health risks that can be associated with pets and all vaccinations should be up to date. Health risks include:

- Cat scratches, bites and litter trays which can cause Toxoplasmosis;
- *Toxicara canis*, a parasite that lives inside dogs bodies and *Campylobacter* a bacterial infection;
- Psittacosis, sometimes called Parrot Fever, although relevant to other birds.

Dogs and cats should be wormed and fleaed regularly.

All outside areas should be kept free of fouling. Pets in cages must be kept clean and gloves should be worn when cleaning. Gloves should also be worn when cleaning litter trays.

Cat litter trays should be unable to be accessed by crawling babies/toddlers.

Fish tanks/other tanks containing pets should be placed where children cannot gain access.

New Pets

If following approval of a carer the family decide to get a dog or other pet, they must consider taking the following actions first:

- Consider carefully what sort of dog/pet would fit with their home and lifestyle.
- Seek background information on the dog/pet e.g. age, history etc.
- Consider seeking expert advice on how to handle/manage the pet given the fostering tasks undertaken and the possible behaviour of children in care.
- Consult with the Fostering Social Worker once all information is known. The Fostering Social Worker can then take further advice from an expert or refer to Panel for approval/review.

Visiting Animals

It is important to note that where foster carers have friends/relatives with pets visiting their house this Policy would apply.

Actions in the Event of Injury to a Child by a Pet

If a pet in the household causes an injury in any way to a fostered child the foster carer must take the following actions immediately:

- Separate the child and the animal, this may include removing the animal from the house;
- Give the child first aid and seek medical advice/attention as soon as possible.
- Notify the Fostering Social Worker or Team Manager/Out of hours if applicable.
- Notify the child's Social Worker or Team Manager/Out of hours if applicable.

For safeguarding reasons, no child will be matched with an unconnected foster family known to own a dog or pet that has bitten/injured an adult or child.

If a child is already living in a foster home and we become aware a dog or pet in the home has bitten/injured an adult or child, the social work team for the child will be informed and the Head of Fostering will make the decision if the foster family will be asked to move the dog or pet out of the home immediately or what safety measures will need to be followed to reduce any risk of future harm.

If the family are not in agreement with the Head of Fostering's decision, we will ask the social work team to review the care plan and we will undertake a review of the approval of the foster carer.

Appendix A: What is a Banned Dog?

The following information is taken from Direct Gov website – Controlling your dog in public:

In the UK, it's against the law to own certain types of dog.

These are the:

- Pit Bull Terrier
- Japanese Tosa
- Dogo Argentino
- Fila Brasileiro

XL Bully dogs are banned in England and Wales.

It's against the law to:

- sell a banned dog
- abandon a banned dog
- give away a banned dog
- breed from a banned dog

Whether your dog is a banned type depends on what it looks like, rather than its breed or name.

For example, if your dog matches many of the characteristics of a Pit Bull Terrier, it may be a banned type.

For more information about the laws on dangerous dogs go to: [Controlling your dog in public: Overview - GOV.UK](#)