

Practice Information Notes

The purpose of Practice Information Notes is to review current information and knowledge, outline the key issues and examine the implications for foster care, and provide best practice recommendations for fostering service providers and links to key documents. Each service will decide on practice based on the needs of the young people in its care and its foster carer population.

Practice Information Note Foster Carers and New Partners

Families exist in lots of different ways. Foster carers may be approved when they are single and in time form a new partnership or significant relationship during their fostering career. While it is right that foster carers should have personal relationships, they have an obligation (within their foster carer agreement) to follow certain processes.

Within fostering, a new relationship is seen as a major change of circumstances and the inevitable impact on children and others within the household needs careful consideration. In relation to this guidance, partner means a significant person with whom the foster carer is having/intending to develop an intimate relationship, which is committed and serious.

Guidance from the fostering service should help support foster carers to navigate each stage of a new and developing relationship in terms of its implications for fostering, and the expectations of the service at every stage need to be clear.

Principles

- Foster carers are entitled to have committed, intimate and personal relationships with others.
- When applicants apply to be single carers the issue of future new partnerships should be considered in the assessment and also referred to in preparation training such as The Skills to Foster.

- During assessment, it is helpful to explore issues such as intimacy, sex and relationships, displays of affection and how these will be managed appropriately.
- Once approved, it is helpful for foster carer to maintain an open discussion with their supervising social about the potential for a new relationship and partner and to talk about its development. It would be good to talk about the difference between 'dating' and a more serious commitment and the implications of both.
- It is important that foster carers are aware that when they are embarking on a new relationship this will impact upon their household, including the children they care for, and they need to recognize the level of scrutiny and re-assessment they will experience. Foster carers need to be aware of at what point they must discuss a possible evolving new relationship with their fostering service.
- Foster carers are required as part of their foster carer agreement to inform their fostering service of any change in personal circumstances such as a new birth, marital status/divorce, a significant change in their health and a relationship with a new partner.
- Every fostering service should have a transparent and accessible policy about reviewing a foster carer's approval where there has been a change in circumstances which should be available in the foster carers' handbook.
- Fostering services should have a clear and specific new partner policy that is easily accessible to both foster carers and social workers.

References to Legislation, Regulation and Statutory Guidance

- **England:**
 - [The Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations 2011](#)
 - [Regulation 27](#): Approval of foster parents
 - [Regulation 28](#): Reviews and terminations of approval
 - [Schedule 5 \(2\)\(b\)\(ii\)](#): Changes to household composition
 - [Children Act 1989: fostering services, Volume 4: statutory guidance on fostering services for looked-after children](#)
 - 5.31: "The Regulations refer only to approval of individuals. Where two people will be sharing the care of a child, whether they be a couple or any other partnership, they should be jointly assessed and approved as foster carers. Where a single foster carer takes a partner who will be sharing the care of any foster children, they must discuss this with their supervising social worker so that agreement can be reached about the best way to update their assessment and to assess the partner for approval as a foster carer within an appropriate timescale."
 - [Disclosure and Barring Service: guidance for children's social care providers and managers](#)
 - Non-resident partners of foster carers: "Providers and managers must show that they have an effective policy to monitor foster carers' relationships. They should guide foster carers on how to manage non-resident partners' access and responsibilities for the children and young people they foster."
- **Northern Ireland:**

- [The Foster Placement \(Children\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 1996](#)
 - [Regulation 3](#): Approval of foster parents
 - [Regulation 4](#): Reviews and terminations of approval
 - [Schedule 2](#) (4)(b): Changes to household composition
- [Children \(NI\) Order 1995 Guidance and Regulations Volume 3: Family Placements and Private Fostering](#) Chapter 4(14)
- **Scotland:**
 - [The Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009](#)
 - [Regulation 22](#): Approval of foster carers
 - [Regulation 25](#): Reviews and terminations of approval
 - [Schedule 6](#) (5)(b): Changes to household composition
 - [Guidance on the The Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009](#) Chapter 11(2)
- **Wales:**
 - [The Fostering Panels \(Establishment and Functions\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2018](#)
 - [Regulation 8](#): Approval of foster parents
 - [Regulation 9](#): Reviews and terminations of approval
 - [Schedule 3](#) (2)(b)(ii): Changes to household composition

Fostering services may support foster carers and new partners at various stages:

1. A foster carer is in the early stages of a relationship and their new partner has no contact with cared for children.
2. Where relationships are developing and recognised as significant and there is a likelihood that their new partner will become a visitor within the fostering household.
3. Once safeguarding checks have been undertaken, the new partner may have contact with children being cared for and might start having overnight stays within the fostering household.
4. Where relationships are becoming more firmly established and it is proposed that the new partner will join the fostering household.

1. When a foster carer is in the early stages of getting to know a potential new partner

In the early stages of a relationship, there should not be intrusive expectations that a foster carer will discuss the early emerging relationship with their supervising social worker. At this stage the person the carer has met should not be visiting the fostering household, meeting or sharing the care of children in foster care or be sleeping over.

As a relationship develops, foster carers need to ensure that their new potential partner is aware of the need for checks to be undertaken on persons who might join the household or be a regular visitor. There needs to be clarity that safeguarding checks would normally be undertaken prior to the prospective new partner having unsupervised contact with cared for children.

2. Where relationships are developing and recognised as significant and there is likelihood that the new partner will become a regular visitor within the fostering household

Foster carers have a responsibility (normally stated clearly within foster carer agreements) to report significant changes of circumstances. Where a relationship is deepening and there is a likelihood that there is serious intention of the relationship progressing into a partnership, it is important that foster carers share this with their supervising social worker. This will allow for appropriate discussions to take place about how the carer can invest in their developing relationship while continuing to meet the needs of the children they care for. Together they should discuss the emerging new relationship and how this will be managed.

There needs to be a clear focus on the potential impact on the children they care for and any other children in the household. The main focus at this stage is on continuing to be understanding of the needs of children and ensuring consistency for them. Safeguarding checks will normally take place at this stage if they have not already commenced. The social worker for any children cared for will need to be made aware that the foster carer has formed a new relationship and that checks will be undertaken.

3. Once safeguarding checks have been undertaken

Once safeguarding checks have been undertaken there needs to be consideration of how children will be made aware of the carer's new relationship and how the prospective partner would be introduced to them. It will be important that children get to know the new partner gradually and that their response to this change in circumstances needs to be monitored by children's foster carers, and the child supported to get to know the new person at their own pace.

Overnight stays by the new partner should not be planned too soon, as children will benefit from getting to know their carer's new partner first. Foster carers need to speak with their supervising social worker to agree the best timescale around overnight stays commencing. The impact upon the fostering household and individual children needs to be carefully monitored by supervising social workers through regular visits and supervision meetings.

Some fostering services may at this stage view a new partner as a 'nominated' or 'support carer' or as someone who is part of the foster carer's support network, and undertake an initial assessment on this basis. This assessment can explore health, lifestyle, family background, knowledge, skills and capacity for working with children.

Others manage this process by using their delegated authority policy and procedure where consideration would also need to be given to what support/preparation would be needed.

4. Where relationships are becoming more firmly established and it is proposed that the new partner will join the fostering household

There needs to be a consideration as to what the new partner's role is likely to be within the fostering household and whether there is a plan that they will move into the household or spend significant periods of time staying over. If the new partner is involved at a significant level in caring for and supporting children it will be expected that they must be assessed for

the fostering role they intend to play. All normal statutory checks and references need to be taken up where a new partner is being assessed as a foster carer.

In these circumstances it is important that the new partner will undergo a full assessment.

There are different approaches taken by fostering agencies in relation to assessment processes when a foster carer enters a relationship with a new partner and if it is the intention that the new partner will be working in partnership to care for the children in the fostering household. Some agencies may complete a new joint assessment which explores both carer's as individuals as well as assessing their new relationship. Other agencies may complete only a new foster carer assessment in relation to the new partner; and (with permission) insert some information regarding the existing partner and their new relationship.

Regardless of the approach taken, the assessment report must explore the impact of the new relationship and will also have to be considered by a fostering panel, as the new partner is applying to be a foster carer alongside the existing foster carer, in this new joint relationship. Technically, for the existing carer, who is already approved to foster, this will involve a review of their approval rather than their needing to be reassessed. If the new partner is approved it would be normal practice for them to subsequently be reviewed together as joint foster carers.

The new partner's assessment report will need to address all the usual areas as required by the fostering regulations in the respective nation of the UK, including family history, previous relationships, education, employment, personal attributes etc and will also need to focus on the new relationship and consider questions such as:

- how the couple will manage living together and fostering together
- how often will the partner be in the family home? Will they be involved in any decision-making around the day to day care of children placed?
- how their respective parenting styles and their roles will blend/complement
- how they would approach differences of approach
- how their relationship would cope with stress and family life and how supportive the new partner will be
- where a new partner has children, whether the children will join the household or be regular visitors and the impact of this
- if the new partner was previously in a relationship, whether there is any relevant information stemming from an ex-partner reference
- the impact on children in the household as the relationship has developed, and the quality of the relationship between the children and new partner
- how will confidentiality be discussed, agreed and maintained?
- how will safer caring practice in the house be reviewed, updated and supported?
- how will the views/feelings of the child/ren cared for be heard and explored?
- how is the child supported to develop their relationship with the carer's partner, and, where applicable, their children?
- will they be supporting the carer with school runs or other specific care/household tasks on a regular basis?
- are they clear about any limits to their role?
- what training would the new partner be expected to undertake, for example the role/responsibilities of fostering, safeguarding/safer caring?
- will there be a move to another property?

Some fostering services require this assessment to be completed before a new partner moves in. Others set a specified time scale, such as within three or six months of moving in. Local policy and practice will vary. Careful preparation will be required in discussing the impact on the existing foster carer if the partner is not recommended for approval.

What if it is proposed that the new partner will retain their own house and spend some time within the fostering household and some time at their existing address?

In these circumstances the new carer could still be assessed as a foster carer if they are still sharing in the care of children who are fostered when they are living as part of that household. Similar situations can arise where partners may work away from the home area, but still provide care when at home.

What if new partners wish to move in but not to be assessed as a foster carer?

Any consideration of a partner purely as a household member raises significant issues which will require careful consideration. It is questionable how realistic it is for a live in partner not to share the care of a child. Services need to have an open discussion about the reasons why the new partner is reluctant. A review of the impact on the fostering household and the foster carer's suitability should be undertaken as would happen with any other new adult to the household.

It is important to clarify the actual role in relation to the care/contact with children placed. There would need to be a clear demonstration that the new partner will not be sharing the care of a child, along with consideration of how this could impact upon children and the household dynamics. In such a situation the fostering agency would still need to consider what safeguarding checks to undertake including DBS/ disclosure and local authority checks.

Questions to consider:

- If the new partner is not being assessed as a foster carer, but has regular unsupervised contact with the children, will they be treated by the fostering service as a member of the foster carer's support network?
- What cover/support would the new partner have if they were subject to an allegation?
- How does the child view the carer's partner? A visitor to the home? Their carer's partner?

What if a new partner moves into a foster carer's home without the knowledge of the fostering service?

Fostering regulations require foster carers and fostering services to enter into a foster care agreement (see [legislation](#)). This obliges foster carers to inform the service of significant changes in personal circumstances and household composition. This needs to be explicitly stated and discussed and recorded in supervision.

Where a partner moves in without the service being made aware, the service should hold a foster carer review immediately, to consider whether the carer's capacity to care for fostered children or household suitability are affected and whether the placement should be terminated. Consideration should be given to the safeguarding of children and the strength of the relationship they have with their foster carer to minimise harm.

The Fostering Network offers practice support throughout the UK. In England, the practice support team comprises regional consultants who provide a range of services to members of The Fostering Network including practice advice, information, forums, support and guidance.

If you would like further information about the practice support team in England or practice support across the UK and what we can do to support you, please contact Sarah McEnhill, Head of Practice: sarah.mcenhill@fostering.net

February 2022