Guidance Note for Social Workers: Viability Assessments

1. Identifying and advising potential carers

When a child cannot remain in the care of their parents it is essential that practitioners identify potential carers from within the child’s network of family and friends to determine whether they will be able to provide safe care to meet the child’s needs until they reach adulthood.

Engaging wider family as early as possible opens the possibility for a family placement. The 26 week timescale for care proceedings guidance sets out an expectation that family and friends care options will have been considered pre proceedings.

A Family Group Conference or Family Meeting should be considered to help identify who else within the family network may be most able to realistically care for the child/ren.

Following potential carers being identified the child’s Social Worker will consider undertaking a viability assessment. Potential carers will be provided with information about viability assessments and the different types of care arrangements and encouraged to consider what the implications will be for them and their family.

In particular, practitioners should explain:

- The difference between fostering, special guardianship and child arrangement orders.
- The implications in respect of any further assessments and support required, thereby enabling the family to make a more informed decision.
- That the process is a complex one and that Social Workers may have to go over information more than once and that they will need to be open and honest, as background checks will be undertaken.

Whilst respecting confidentiality it is important that family members being assessed are given as much information as possible about:

- the reasons for children’s services involvement
- the specific needs of the child
- the purpose of the viability assessment and what the process entails and who the information will be shared with
- the next steps if the viability is negative or positive
- the legal process and possible orders that the court may make
- the support that may be available to them

Fact Sheets are available from the Family and Friends Team to support this: Viability Assessments – Family and Friends Carers and Different Types of Family and Friends Care.

2. The viability assessment

When completing a viability assessment the key question is: ‘Could the family member being assessed, with the provision of appropriate support, be able to provide for this child’s needs?’
The viability assessment must be thorough and evidence-based and completed within 20 working days. The viability assessment will be completed on the BAAF Form C; this will then form the basis of the full report should the application progress.

The following headings summarise the needs that the Social Worker should explore in respect of the child:

- **Physical needs**, including any medical or health needs the child has, how these are managed and what level of input will be required from the carer. The potential carer should be able to meet all day to day health and medical needs, a healthy diet and age-appropriate care.

- **Educational needs**, including whether the child has any specific schooling needs and whether they would need to change schools and how this would be managed, as well as whether the child has any learning or behavioural needs and is subject to an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

- **Emotional and behavioural needs**, including any behaviour that may cause disruption and destabilise the household, any therapeutic needs and how they should be met. It will also be important to explore the carer’s understanding of managing transition and difficulties in attachment.

- **Identity needs**, including how the child will understand their journey and story, their cultural, religious and linguistic needs, their gender identity and sexuality, and how the child will be understood in the family system.

- **Contact needs**, including the potential carer’s attitude to and ability to manage contact with parents both now and in the future and ability to manage the risk that each parent may pose.

The following headings summarise some of the areas that the Social Worker should explore in respect of the family member being assessed:

- What relationship and regular contact the child has to the proposed carer
- What support the proposed carer has provided to the child and family in crisis
- How the proposed carer has responded to any safeguarding issues
- What accommodation the proposed carer will be able to provide for the child
- What are the applicant’s aspirations for the child
- An outline of any health or social issues that we need to be aware of at the earliest point
- Citizenship/immigration status
- Criminal warnings, cautions, convictions
- Working pattern
- Finances
- Ability to provide childcare and what support may be required
- Motivation
- Parenting/caring experience/capacity
- Understanding of the concerns and insight into the impact of this on the child
- Understanding and ability to safeguard and protect the child from harm in the future
- Own previous involvement with children’s services

The Social Worker will complete a genogram of the potential carer’s family and then a subsequent genogram including the subject child. An eco map will also be prepared with the applicants and make an initial assessment outlining the strengths and vulnerabilities of the applicants to be able to offer permanence to the child. The viability will then make a recommendation as to whether the application should progress to full assessment.
3. Recommendation

The assessment should be evidence based, and include analysis of the evidence and consider the practical needs of an additional child joining the family, exploring what the daily lived experience might be for the new family.

A viability assessment should contain enough detail to evidence that there is a need for a full assessment, or that this person is not a realistic option for the child. Each issue should be considered in relation to the current and likely future needs of the specific child. The viability assessment should set out clearly:

- The information gathered by the Social Worker in relation to the child’s current and anticipated need.
- The ability of the family member or friend being assessed to meet those needs (with appropriate support).
- The Social Worker’s analysis of this evidence, which underpins the recommendation they have reached.

A viability assessment will only make a recommendation about whether further assessment is required. It does make recommendations in respect of placement or legal orders. **Further assessment is always required before a decision to make a placement is made.**

When completed, the Viability Assessment will initially be read by the Team Manager for the Area team. The Team Manager will review and analyse whether in their judgement the evidence supports the recommendation proposed.

If the viability assessment does not recommend further assessment then the outcome will be shared with the applicants by the child’s Social Worker and they will be advised to seek legal advice should they not agree with the outcome.

If the viability assessment identifies strengths to support progression to a full assessment then the Social Worker will forward the report to the Family and Friends Team for joint consideration as to whether to progress to full assessment. If it is then agreed that the assessment should progress, the viability assessment will be signed by the Social Worker and Team Managers for the Area and the Family and Friends Team. If further information is required to reach this recommendation then a joint visit with the Family and Friends Team may be undertaken.

Prior to filing at Court all positive viability assessments **must** be signed by both the Area and Family Friends Team Managers.

Once the viability is signed by both Team Managers and agreed, the assessment will be allocated for further assessment. Once allocated a minimum of 12 weeks will be required to complete the full assessment.

If you have any queries regarding viability assessments or wish to request a joint visit please contact: **Family and Friends Duty Desk 0121 464 4945.**

**We also offer viability consultation sessions on a Monday afternoon if you wish to attend please contact:** Family and Friends Duty Desk 0121 464 4945.

For further information please refer to: Initial Family and Friends Care Assessment: A Good Practice Guide – developed by Family Rights Group in partnership with an expert working group.