VIABILITY ASSESSMENTS

**Information sheet for families and potential carers**

This information sheet has been produced to answer some of the most frequently asked questions about local authority initial viability assessments of family and friends to care for a child.

**1. What is an initial viability assessment?**

If there are doubts about whether a child can live with their parents, Rotherham Council will look into the possibility of them living safely with another member of their family and friends network. In order to decide whether this is the right option for the child, an assessment of the potential carer will need to take place. Many councils start the process with a shorter assessment first. That might be called a preliminary assessment, a screening assessment, a viability assessment, or other similar name. The idea is to do a quick assessment to see if living with the family member or friend is potentially a realistic option for the child. If it is, a full assessment would then need to be completed. However, if at the end of the shorter assessment, there is good reason why it is unlikely that the full assessment would be positive, it is best for everyone, especially the child, that this is known before time is spent on the full assessment.

So, an initial viability assessment is a short assessment focused on getting information about the key things that will allow the council to decide if a full assessment has a chance of a positive outcome. This does not mean that everything about the viability assessment has to be perfect - there may be some questions that need more investigation or extra time to look into more carefully. It is, however, a way of making sure there is no unnecessary delay in making the right decision for the child if it is unrealistic that a family member or friend is in a position to look after them.

**2. How does a relative or family friend get asked to take part in one?**

If you know that a child may not be able to live or stay with their parents and wish to be considered to take on the care of the child, then you can put yourself forward to be assessed as a potential carer. It is important to do this as soon as possible. Usually there will have been a meeting, a family group conference or a court hearing, where the parents will have been asked who they would like to look after the child if they are not able to do it themselves. It is important to know that, at this stage, no final decisions have been made. Being asked whether you can look after the child does not mean that the parents have given up or been told that they cannot care for the child – the process looks at both options at the same time. However, it is important to know that, if you are putting yourself forward to look after a child, the assessment will consider whether you are able to care for the child in the short term and also for the rest of their childhood. Some siblings have different biological parents and the Council may wish to keep the children from different birth parents together as a priority. Therefore you may be asked if you could also care for non-biological children in addition to your own relative(s) in order to keep the siblings together. If a parent or other relative has put you forward, then a social worker will contact you to ask if you are willing to be considered as a carer for the child. You do not have to take part in the assessment, but if you do not, then the Council cannot consider placing the child with you.

**3. Who will do the assessment?**

Often it will be the child’s social worker who carries out the initial viability assessment with you. However, it might be a social worker from another team who has experience of doing full assessments of potential carers. It might be both.

**4. Who else gets to see the assessment?**

A viability assessment would normally be seen by the judge who is making decisions about the child’s future, the social worker and other people within the council who have to make recommendations about the child, the child’s parents, and the lawyers who represent all of them. If this document is used in court proceedings there are strict rules about anyone showing it to other people. If there is something within the assessment which is very private and personal and you would not want other people to see it, you can ask the social worker if it is okay that it does not to go into the report. It will depend on what it is, and how essential it is to the recommendation as to whether that is possible, but the social worker should let you know before the report is sent to other people whether that piece of information has to be included or not. If there is any information which is factually inaccurate, then you can ask the Social Worker to correct it.

**5. How should an initial viability assessment be done?**

● It should make sure that you understand what is being asked and why.

● It should give you the information that you need about the child to enable you to answer the questions properly.

● It should give you the chance to explain your situation.

● It should give you the opportunity to say how you will address any concerns that the person doing the assessment may have about you taking on the care of the child.

● It should decide on evidence – things that can be checked and proved, not ‘bad feelings’ or ‘suspicions’.

● It should remember the real benefits for a child of growing up within their own family.

● It should be FAIR.

**6. What is involved in an initial viability assessment?**

It is very likely that the social worker will want to visit you at your home and look around. They may wish to see the bedroom/sleeping area that the child would have if they came to stay with you. You could discuss with them what help you would need to make these arrangements work, for example, if you feel your current housing situation is not ideal. They would need to talk to everyone who lives in the house, or who stays there overnight. They will also ask you about anyone who regularly visits the house and they may need to speak to them. They may want to know about your background, such as what your family life was like growing up and your education. They will need to talk to you about your own experiences of looking after children, how things are with your partner if you are in a relationship, what your health is like, how you manage your money and what time you would be able to spend with the child if they came to live with you. You should be able to discuss with them what help would be needed in any of these areas, for example with childcare, to keep your job or to manage your circumstances.

They will probably want to talk to you about what has been happening with the child, and whether you understand how that might make the child feel and how you would be able to keep the child safe. That might involve showing that you would be able to be clear with the parents about when they can see the child and whether they can come to your home while the child is there. Again, you can discuss with the assessor what help you might need, for example, in managing the child seeing their parents.

Some councils contact other people as part of the initial viability assessment. They may do a criminal records check or contact the police to ask whether you and any other person, potentially as young as 16 years old, in your household have ever been in trouble. They may want to speak with your doctor. They may want to check whether there have ever been any concerns about your own children and may want to speak to your children’s school about how they are doing. If this isn’t done as part of the initial viability assessment, it will happen as part of a full assessment if this takes place.

**7. How long would the assessment take?**

There would usually be one or two visits by the social worker(s). If there is a lot to talk about, there might be more. It would normally take between two and four weeks from the start of the viability assessment to getting an answer as to whether a full assessment is recommended.

**8. What happens when the assessment is finished?**

The social worker should talk to you about what they intend to recommend, and to tell you about anything that worries them to give you the chance to explain. The social worker will write up the assessment and give you a copy of it. If you do not agree with anything included in the assessment report you should explain this to the social worker. If there are any factual inaccuracies then you could ask the Social Worker to correct these.

**9. What happens if the assessment is positive?**

If the initial viability assessment is positive, then usually you will go on to have a full assessment. This normally takes a few months. It might be done by the same person who did the viability or it could be a new person. Even if the viability assessment is positive there might be some reasons why a full assessment is not done – for example, you might have changed your mind, the court might have decided that the child will go to live with their parent, or there might be several positive viability assessments, in which case a discussion is needed with the Council and the family network to decide which person would be best placed to care for the child in the long term if necessary. It may be advisable to get independent legal advice at this point.

**10. What happens if the assessment is negative?**

If the assessment is negative, then the council would not agree to continue with a full assessment of you. They should give you a letter that explains to you all of your options at that stage. Those options are likely to include:

● Accepting the decision;

● Writing a letter that explains why you disagree, or whether you think things in the report are wrong. That

letter can then be attached to the report so that anyone who reads it sees your side;

● Getting independent legal advice. You can ring Family Rights Group’s free independent specialist advice

line. You may wish to seek advice from a lawyer on the Law Society Children Panel, although this may not

be free, so it’s important for you to find out first what it would cost to get this advice;

● Going to a court hearing to ask the court to make a legal order that the child come to live with you, if the child can’t be with their parents. It may be that you would want to pursue more than one option, and if you disagree with the outcome of the assessment it is likely that you will want to explain that to the local authority, get independent legal advice, and perhaps also attend court.

**11. Important things that might be discussed in the initial viability assessment**

There are a number of important factors to think about before and during the assessment, as the social worker(s) may wish to discuss them with you to form part of the assessment.

**a.** Any children that live in your home now, and how another child would fit into your life and with your own children.

**b.** If there were concerns about your care for your own children, the social worker(s) will want to discuss what they were, how long ago there were concerns, how you sorted them out, what changes you have made since then, whether those problems might happen again, and why you think that they would not. If you have had children previously removed from your care that might not automatically rule you out but it is certainly something important that the social worker would need to discuss.

**c.** Any criminal offences you or anyone else in your household have committed – particularly if this relates to offences against a child, violent or sexual offences, or offences involving drugs/alcohol or dishonesty. Again, the social worker(s) would want to discuss what happened, when it happened, how things have changed since then and whether something similar might happen again.

**d.** Your physical and mental health – the social worker(s) will consider whether you are physically able to look after a child of this age and until they grow up. If you had previous health problems, what has changed since then? If you currently have problems, how are you managing with this now and how will you manage in the future? If you are a smoker or misuse drugs or alcohol, the social worker(s) will want to discuss your

understanding of how this would impact on the child and whether you are willing and able to quit.

**e.** Your home – the social worker(s) will consider whether it is a suitable home for the child to live. If it needs work, how can that work be done and is there help that the Council could reasonably provide? Would you need to move, and if so, what plans do you have to make that work?

**f.** The other adults who live in the home – all of the questions above will apply to them too. How do they feel about the child coming to live with you? How will they help you?

**g.** Why you want to look after the child, how well you know the child, and will you be able to stick with it? What do you understand about the difficulties which may arise and how you will solve problems that come up?

**h.** Whether you have the time to care for the child and what adjustments you would need to make to your work or lifestyle in order to cope. Again, it is reasonable to suggest ways that the Council might be able to help you make the placement work.

**i.** Your relationship with the child’s parents and your understanding of why the child is not with them. The Social Worker(s) will want to know whether you will be able to keep the child safe whilst also supporting them in their relationship with their parents and siblings where appropriate.

**j.** Generally, what support you might need in order to look after the child.