

Practice Guidance regarding Assessment and Approval of Prospective Adopters



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1. Recruitment and Responding to Initial Enquiries

Adopt Thames Valley aims to recruit and assess prospective adopters who can meet the needs of children for whom adoption is the plan.

We encourage applications from couples and single people regardless of age, identity, race, disability, LGBTQ+ and cultural background, as the children requiring adoptive placements are diverse.

Potential applicants may approach the You Can Adopt Website or Adopt Thames Valley for general information about adoption. This can include, for example, information on the legal implications of adoption, eligibility criteria, the characteristics of children awaiting adoption and the approval process.

Where a potential applicant decides, after receiving general information, that they would like to pursue an adoption further, they may approach Adopt Thames Valley for more detailed information about adoption.

This information should be provided within ten working days through an information session, a visit, pre-planned telephone call or similar arrangement with the potential adopter. There may need to be some flexibility with appointment times. This will need to be discussed on an individual basis. This is the minimum response at this stage; further information sessions may be provided if applicable.

Detailed information should enable potential adopters to consider better whether they want to proceed with the approval process and to reflect on the parenting needs of the children awaiting adoption. Detailed information should also enable them to consider their expectations of adoption, and the consequences for them and their family of caring for an adopted child who may have a range of complex needs.

The local authority has a duty to provide information on adoption support services to anyone informing the authority that they wish to adopt a child.

If an enquirer is interested in intercountry adoption, they will be referred to Coram Baaf IAC- Intercountry Adoption Centre.

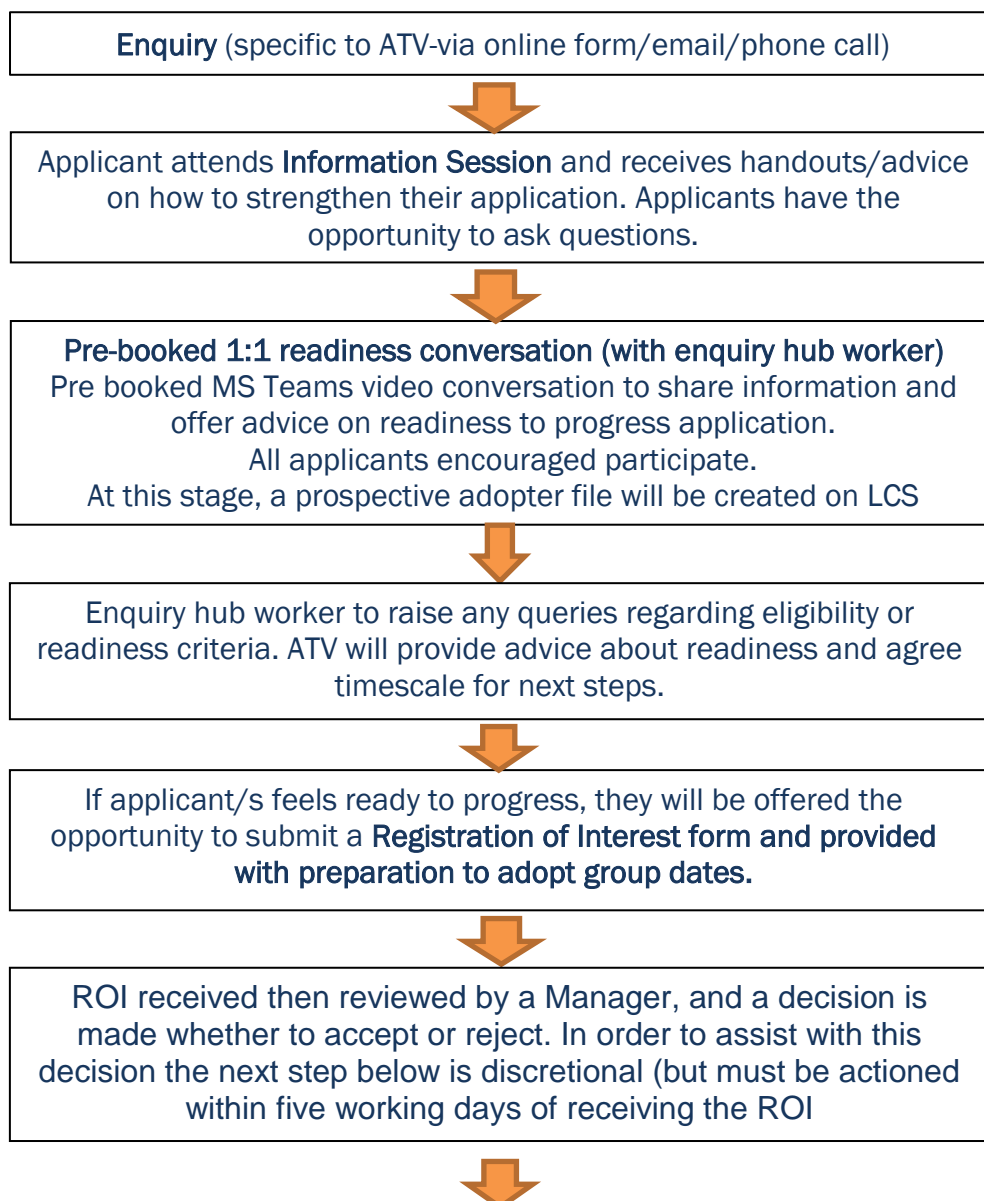
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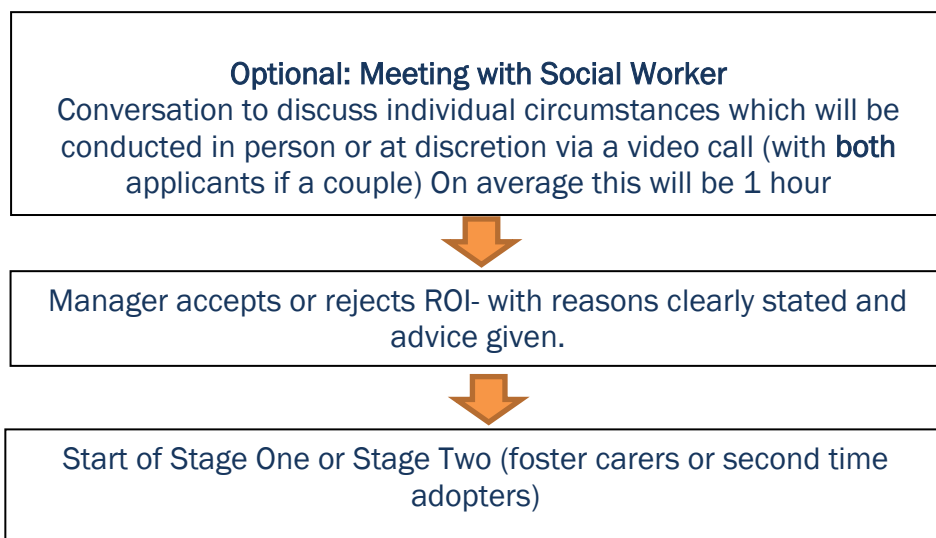
There is a shortened process for prospective adopters who have already been approved as foster carers/adopters – see **ATV Fast-Track Practice Guidance**

Basic information about Early Permanence (Fostering For Adoption) should be available in the general information made available to prospective adopters and then in more detail if they engage more fully in the preparation and assessment process. This information should outline:

- What the objectives of Early Permanence are;
- In what circumstances it might apply;
- What the process is for becoming an Early Permanence carer;
- What the benefits and challenges might be.

Enquiry Process





2. Criteria for Prospective Adopters

An individual or couple cannot apply for an assessment of their suitability to adopt unless they meet, or would meet, the eligibility criteria to apply for an Adoption Order. The criteria are that:

- The prospective adopter(s) is at least 21 years old;
- At least one of the couple or the single prospective adopter is domiciled in a part of the British Islands or both of the couple or the single prospective adopter have been habitually resident in a part of the British Islands for a period of not less than one year ending with the date of the application for an adoption order; and
- Neither prospective adopter(s) nor an adult member of their household has been convicted or cautioned in respect of a specified offence.

2.1 Individual and Joint

Applications will be considered from married couples, civil partners, unmarried couples or single people. In the case of joint applications, ATV advises the duration of the relationship has been a minimum of 2 years.

If applicants are in a relationship, they will need to have lived together for more than a year.

2.2 Religion

Applications will be considered from people of any or no religious persuasion.

2.3 Ethnicity

Applications will be considered from people of any race or culture.

A prospective adopter should be considered able to parent a child with whom they do not share the same ethnicity, provided they can meet the child's most important identified needs throughout the child's childhood. Only in very exceptional circumstances should matching a child with prospective adopters be delayed solely on the grounds that the available prospective adopters cannot meet all the child's needs arising from their racial or cultural background. A prospective adopter can be matched with a child with whom they do not share the same ethnicity, if they can respect, reflect or

actively develop a child's racial identity from the point they are matched and as they develop throughout their childhood. The prospective adopter needs to demonstrate that they fully understand that having a child from a different ethnic group will present a number of challenges, not least that there may be visible differences that can affect a child's self-esteem and increase their feelings of difference. For example, the child may have to deal with questions from their peers about why they are 'different' to their family.

2.4 Age

The minimum age for adopters is 21 years. There is no specific upper age limit. Older and more experienced people could take on the care of older children, provided they will have the health and vigour to meet the child's varied demands in their growing years and to be there for them into adulthood. Age is also not necessarily linked to general health, fitness and emotional wellbeing. The agency's medical adviser should investigate and obtain relevant information about a prospective adopter's health in order to be satisfied that they are able to take on the task of adopting a child and have the expectation of caring for the child through childhood and into adulthood.

2.5 Gender

Applications will be considered from all people of whatever their gender, including trans-gendered applicants.

2.6 Sexual Orientation

Applications will be considered from people of any sexual orientation.

2.7 Health

Applicants will be required to have a full medical and undergo any further tests/checks that may be required by the Adoption Panel's Medical Adviser. The Medical Adviser will advise on the applicants' ability, from a health point of view, to meet the needs of a child throughout their childhood.

General advice given by ATV is that that applicants have a BMI of under forty before proceeding with an adoption assessment process. Applicants should not drink more than fourteen units of alcohol per week. *Separate advice is also contained within the separate smoking and vaping policy.*

2.8 Criminal Convictions

A person who is seeking approval as an adoptive parent will not be considered if they or any adult member of the household has been cautioned of a specified nature, which are outlined in the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, regulation twenty-five.

Other convictions will not necessarily preclude an application, but this will depend on the seriousness of the offence and how long ago it was committed. In cases of doubt or dispute, the matter will be referred to the Adoption Head of Service.

2.9 Accommodation

Applicants may own their own home or live in rented accommodation. They will have to demonstrate that they have a secure home environment in which to bring up a child.

They will need accommodation which is safe and appropriate to the number and ages of the children they are seeking to adopt.

2.10 Applicants who have a Child or Children

Applications will be accepted from people who already have a child, in which case the following criterion apply: There should be a minimum age gap of at least two years between child/ren already

in the family and an adopted child. Therefore, if the applicant has an existing child/ren, Adopt Thames Valley expects the youngest child to be at least three years of age before starting the adoption process.

2.11 Domicile/Habitual Residence in the British Isles

Applicants do not have to have British Citizenship but should have their Domicile or Habitual Residence in the British Isles. Where there is a joint application, only one of the applicants need to be domiciled in the British Isles or both should be habitually resident here. In all these cases it is essential to see all relevant documents to fully establish nationality and immigration status.

Where there is doubt, potential applicants should be asked to seek independent advice.

2.12 Location

Applications are welcome from those who reside within the ATV borders, or within an hour's travelling distance from one of the three office bases in Woodley Reading, Oxford city and Swindon.

Applicants must be prepared to travel for group meetings and introductions and be available for assessment and home visits.

2.13 Childcare experience

ATV encourages all applicants who wish to adopt to engage with voluntary childcare experience, to strengthen their application and skill set to adopt. This should be underway before proceeding to Stage One. The childcare should be current and relevant to the age range that they would like to consider). A minimum of six sessions or eight hours is required.

NB. There may be some exceptions (i.e., if nursery/primary school teachers.) Applicants who are already parents are encouraged to increase their childcare experience with children unknown to them, but this is not mandatory.

2.14 Bereavement/significant life events/ fertility treatment:

ATV advises there should be sufficient time (usually at least 6 months) between a significant life event, such as a bereavement or fertility treatment, before progressing with an application to adopt.

2.15 Housing/accommodation:

ATV accepts applicants who do not have a spare room if they wish to be considered for adopting a child under the age of 2 years and have a clear plan for acquiring a larger home in the future. If there are existing children in the family, there needs to be evidence that there is ample living and sleeping space.

If applicants are about to undergo extensive building work in their home, or indeed move, within the next 6 months, then we would strongly advise that they do so before progressing with adoption application.

2.16 Employment:

If an applicant has plans to change their employment they should be advised to wait until they are settled in their new role and have concluded any probationary period before progressing with an adoption application. This enables obtaining an employment reference in Stage One, and entitlement for adoption leave and pay to be clarified.

2.17 Dangerous Dogs:

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ATV is unable to accept applications from applicant/s who own a pet which is classified under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991

3. Registration of Interest in Adoption

Once a prospective adopter has received information about adoption, they will either decide that adoption is not right for them at that point in time or will wish to move to the next stage of the process. Should they wish to move to the next stage, they will need to formally register their interest to enter Stage One of the approval process. From this point they are referred to as 'prospective adopters.' Prospective adopters will register their interest via a 'Registration of Interest form which will include as a minimum:

- Name and address of the prospective adopters;
- Authority to commence checks and references;
- Confirmation that the prospective adopters have not registered their approval with another agency;
- Questions to ensure the prospective adopters meet the eligibility criteria
- Name, gender, date and place of birth and address including the local authority area;
- If the prospective adopter is married or has formed a civil partnership and is applying alone for an assessment of their suitability to adopt, the reasons for this;
- Details of any previous family court proceedings in which the prospective adopter has been involved;
- Names and addresses of at least five referees who will give personal references on the prospective adopter, and three for single applicants. Not more than one per applicant of whom may be a relative.
- Name and address of the prospective adopter's registered medical practitioner;
- If the prospective adopter:
 - Is married, the date and place of the marriage;
 - Has formed a civil partnership, the date and place of registration of that partnership;
or
 - Has a partner, details of that relationship.
- Details of any previous marriage, civil partnership or relationship.
- Whether the prospective adopter is domiciled or habitually resident in a part of the British Islands and if habitually resident for how long they have been habitually resident
- Where the prospective adopter lives in another local authority area, or has lived in another Local Authority within the last 10 years, it should be ascertained whether that local authority has any information about the prospective adopter which may be relevant to the assessment of the prospective adopter's suitability to adopt and, if so, a written report should be obtained from that authority setting out that information;
- Adopt Thames Valley may ask the prospective adopter to provide any further information the agency may reasonably require.

- Details of other members of the prospective adopter's household (including any children of the prospective adopter whether or not resident in the household).

A decision should be reached within five working days from receipt of a registration of interest whether or not to accept this, unless there are exceptional circumstances which mean that longer is needed. There may be circumstances where it would not be appropriate for the agency to accept a registration of interest, such as where there is lack of capacity to take on more prospective adopters. In cases like this, the agency should redirect the prospective adopter to the You Can Adopt website or another agency which is currently recruiting.

The agency must not refuse to accept registrations of interest on the grounds of, for example, a prospective adopter's ethnicity, age, health, LGBTQ+, disability, religious beliefs or because they do not share the same ethnicity, culture or religious beliefs with the children waiting for an adoptive family.

Where the agency declines a registration of interest it should provide the prospective adopter with a clear written explanation of the reasons why and offer them the choice of going directly to another agency or to You Can Adopt website for signposting to another agency.

3. Stage One

3.1 Purpose and Process (For Fast-Track assessments please see separate guidance)

Stage One begins when the agency accepts the registration of interest in adoption and should normally take no more than **two months** to complete. It is during this stage that the prospective adopter will be exploring the extent of their interest in and capacity for adoption, prior to a firmer decision on whether to proceed to Stage Two – the Assessment Process. Stage One will focus on initial training and preparation, and on ascertaining, through prescribed checks and references, whether there is any absolute reason the prospective adopter should not proceed further. The expectation is that the prospective adopter will be actively involved in the Stage One process and agencies are expected to consider fully the prospective adopter's wishes on how they wish to work through Stage One. All prescribed checks and references must be conducted during Stage One in parallel with initial training and preparation.

The agency will explain in detail the Stage One process and what will be required of the prospective adopter and will draw up the Prospective Adopter Stage One Plan which will set out the responsibilities and expectations of both the prospective adopter and the agency during Stage One.

Whilst the importance of openness must be stressed to the prospective adopter, it should not be assumed that a failure to disclose information automatically implies that the prospective adopter is unsuitable. It will be necessary to discuss the matter and the reasons for non-disclosure.

Prospective adopters should be encouraged to use any other materials that offer them the opportunity to explore and reach an informed view about aspects of parenting and their parenting capacity and help them to identify their own training needs. A visit, meeting or pre-planned telephone call with the prospective adopter (whatever works best for them and best meets their preferences) should be undertaken to ensure that they have the opportunity to ask for more information or training based on their particular needs.

Stage One ends with the end of Stage One review, with a final decision to progress to Stage Two made by the relevant team manager.

3.2 Stage One Information

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The following information must be gathered during Stage One.

DBS

Criminal record checks with the Disclosure and Barring Service must be conducted on the prospective adopter and any members of their household aged 18 years and over. There may be some occasions where a household member who is 16 years + may be asked to undertake a DBS, if they are involved in a 'regulated activity'

Prior to Stage One, prospective adopters should be given an explanation of the statutory duty on the agency to conduct checks into their background and into the background of any other adult members of their household. It should be made clear that the prospective adopters will not be able to proceed to Stage Two where criminal record checks identify them or an adult member of their household as having been convicted of a specified offence or police caution in respect of a specified offence.

A 'specified offence' means:

- An offence against a child/ any offence involving bodily injury to a child, other than an offence of common assault or battery;
- An offence relating to indecent images of children under the age of sixteen;
- Sexual offences of rape; assault by penetration; causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent; sexual activity/ causing or inciting sexual activity/ inducement, threat or deception to procure sexual activity with a person with a mental disorder impeding choice.

Where the prospective adopter's full history cannot be ascertained by conducting a criminal record check and other background checks (for example, where they have lived abroad for an extended period a Certificate of Good Conduct should be sought- see overseas check section below), a decision should be taken as to whether to carry out any other checks or take up additional references. The agency should ensure it has sufficient information to justify continuing with Stage One but not delay the approval process. If it decides not to proceed, it should provide the prospective adopter with a clear written explanation of the reasons why.

The agency may not consider a prospective adopter suitable to adopt a child if they or any adult member of their household has been convicted of a specified offence committed at 18 or over, or has received a police caution in respect of a specified offence which they admitted at the time the caution was given. In such circumstances the agency must notify the prospective adopter in writing, with reasons, without delay.

Where the criminal record checks disclose previous convictions or cautions for non-specified offences, the agency may consider that the prospective adopter is not suitable to adopt. In such circumstances, the agency must exercise its discretion and decide whether to continue with Stage One. If it decides not to proceed, it must notify the prospective adopter in writing, with reasons, without delay. A DBS risk assessment will be undertaken, and the outcome of this must be agreed and signed off by the ATV Head of Service before a decision about suitability can be determined.

In circumstances where the application is a joint application, the agency may only inform the prospective adopter who is the convicted or cautioned individual of the specific reason for terminating Stage One. The social worker should explain to that person that the agency will not inform the other person of the specific conviction or caution but will inform them that because of information obtained from the checks the joint application cannot proceed.

Likewise, where the checks reveal information about an adult member of the household that indicates that the agency must terminate Stage One, the agency is restricted from disclosing information about that conviction or caution which prevents the application from proceeding. It may inform that individual and suggest that they inform the joint prospective adopter, but it may not do so itself. In such a case, the agency should counsel the prospective adopter that its checks indicate that the agency must not continue with Stage One and that its checks indicate that the agency should not proceed with the application.

Overseas checks/ International DBS

(If required adopters are asked to obtain themselves)

If the applicant/s has lived in another country from the age of 18 years old for 12 months or more, applicants will be required to get confirmation that there are no records of them offending during their time there. This is an equivalent to a DBS in a foreign country, known as a Certificate of Good Conduct (CGC). Applicants would need to obtain a CGC from the embassy of the country they resided in and there may be a charge for this.

A decision needs to be made about the time period that the checks should cover. A rule of thumb is the last 10 years, but this should be agreed on a case-by-case basis with the relevant team manager.

The applicant should provide attempts made to obtain overseas checks, and this should be recorded clearly in the PAR.

If overseas checks cannot be obtained for the agreed time period, then alternative evidence/checks/references, to cover this period, should be sought.

Health Assessment and Agency Medical Advice

The applicants will also be asked to arrange for an adoption medical examination and report from their GP. The agency will provide the applicants with the relevant Coram BAAF medical forms for completion by the GP. The completed Medical Form should then be sent to the Medical Adviser.

The GP's report should have been written within the 6 months prior to the Adoption Panel meeting which considers the application and cover the matters specified in Part 2 of Schedule 4 AAR 2005. If this is not the case, then applicants will be asked to complete a self-declaration form regarding any health status updates.

The agency's medical adviser will need to provide a summary of the prospective adopter's state of health as part of the prospective adopter's report. The adviser will need to form a view as to the adequacy of the medical reports received and to advise whether additional specialist opinion should be obtained. The prospective adopter's current GP may not have a full health history of the prospective adopter, particularly if they have received private medical care outside the NHS. Prospective adopters should be helped to understand the importance of making their full health history available to the agency's medical adviser.

Agencies have a duty to satisfy themselves that prospective adopters have a reasonable expectation of continuing to enjoy good health. The medical adviser should explain and interpret health information from the prospective adopter, their GP, and consultants to facilitate adoption panel discussion. The opinion of the agency's medical adviser needs to be given sufficient weight by adoption panels and the Agency Decision Maker.

Mild chronic conditions are unlikely to preclude people from adopting provided that the condition does not place the child at risk through an inability of the individual to protect the child from commonplace hazards or limit them in providing children with a range of beneficial experiences and opportunities. The possibility of providing support in appropriate cases to assist in overcoming any possible negative consequences arising from disability or restricted mobility should be borne in mind. More severe health conditions may raise a question about the suitability of the prospective adopter, but each case will have to be considered on its own facts and with appropriate advice.

Adopt Thames Valley strongly advises applicants who have a BMI of 40 or over, to try and reduce this before progressing. Applicants need to demonstrate that they can commit to a healthy lifestyle, be active and meet the physical needs of our children.

Whilst episodes of poor mental health would not stop somebody from progressing, applicants need to have been stable in their treatment for 6 months and the GP/consultant will be asked to comment on this as part of their medical check.

Adopt Thames Valley aims to place all children within a smoke free adoptive home. Therefore, adoptive applicants will need to have ceased smoking/vaping for a minimum of 6 months before applying. There are some exceptions to this guidance, please refer to [ATV practice guidance on Smoking/Vaping](#) for more details.

Personal references

Single applicants will be asked to provide a minimum of three referees, of which not more than one will be a family member. For couples, they will be asked to provide details of five referees, with no more than two being family members (preferably one family member each). Referee's will have known the applicant for a minimum of three years. In Stage Two, the assessing social worker will interview a minimum of three referees, at least two of these will be non-related. A written report must be prepared of the interviews held with each referee.

Referees should be people who know the applicants well in a personal capacity, and it is desirable that the referees have direct experience of caring for children, either in a personal or professional capacity.

Referee interviews can be conducted via video call, or in person if felt necessary.

Employment references

A written reference will also be obtained from each applicant's last/current employer. If the applicant is yet to tell their employer about plans for adoption, this may be completed in Stage Two. This decision is at the team managers discretion.

Previous work experience with children or vulnerable adults.

If applicant has previously worked/volunteered with children or vulnerable adults a reference will be requested. A decision needs to be made about the time period that the checks should cover. A rule of thumb is 10 years, but this should be agreed on a case-by-case basis with the relevant team manager.

OFSTED

An Ofsted check may be applicable depending on the type of employment the applicant has been engaged with, should the role be one which is registered with OFSTED.

Self-employed applicants:

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If an applicant/s is self-employed, a reference should be sought from their accountant or business partner. If these are not available, consideration of whether a client reference would be beneficial. *Templates are available for this request.*

Applicants who have previously fostered or adopted

Where the prospective applicant has made a previous application to foster or adopt, the relevant agency must be asked to confirm in writing the outcome of the application and provide a written reference. The allocated adoption social worker will arrange for requests for written references to be sent. *Templates are available for all reference requests.*

Previous partner references

If the applicant/s has previously been married, co-habited or have co-parented children from a previous relationship ATV will seek a reference.

If the relationship had been violent or the applicant would be at risk if ATV contacted an ex-partner, or the applicant genuinely has no contact details for the ex-partner, the applicant will be asked to provide a supplementary referee who knew them at the time of the relationship and who can verify the nature of the relationship.

Any decision not to request a reference must be recorded on the case file and Prospective adopter report (Part 2).

The applicant must evidence what attempts they have made to contact an ex-partner. These attempts should satisfy the agency as being adequate and be recorded on the case file, examples being attempts to trace them via mutual friends, family or via social media.

Existing adult child, or children living away from the family home

Children of the applicant(s) living away from home will be contacted, and references sought. There may be occasions where this is not felt to be appropriate, and a decision about this will be made by the relevant Team manager. Any decision not to request a reference must be recorded on the case file and Prospective adopter report (Part 2).

For all existing children in education, a professional reference will be sought

As part of the assessment, where the applicant has school age children, the relevant school(s) will be contacted, to ascertain that there are no concerns about the child, that they attend regularly and that the parents are active in their communication with school when needed.

Any other key professional reference as felt necessary, such as social worker, therapist etc may also be contacted.

For children not in educational settings (to include children who are home educated)

- For any child/ren in the household under 5 a reference could be considered by a health visitor-
- Or other professional working closely with the child e.g. childminder, playworker, brownie leader

Local Authority checks

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The agency must ascertain whether the local authority in whose area the prospective adopter has their home has any information about them that may be relevant to the assessment. If so, the agency must obtain from that authority a written report setting out the information. Local authorities asked for this information should comply promptly with these requests and provide this information within fifteen working days wherever possible. In requesting information from a local authority, the agency should seek to ascertain whether records held by social services and education departments hold relevant information about the prospective adopter.

ATV will seek LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) checks for applicants who have worked or volunteered with children, vulnerable adults or are within Positions of Trusts, for the last 10 years.

There is no reason in principle why information held by one part of the local authority should not be shared with another. Protocols operated by children's services may, however, restrict access to cases where there is concern for the safety of a child. This means that an adoption check may not automatically involve a check to see whether a child of the family has been the subject of a Child Protection Plan unless such a check is specifically requested. The prospective adopter may have lived for only a brief period in the area of their local authority. In such cases, the agency should obtain information from the prospective adopter's former local authorities.

Therapeutic intervention references

If the applicant/s has engaged in any therapy/ counselling within the last 10 years a reference will be sought.

Other references which may be applicable

- Landlord
- SSAFA
- Settled status check

Other checks conducted in Stage One

- Social Media check
- Health and safety check
- Pet assessment questionnaire
- Financial assessment, with information verified by a minimum of 3 months bank/credit card/loan statements and credit check

3.3 Preparation to Adopt Training

Adopt Thames Valley expect all first-time prospective adopters to attend the agency's Preparation to Adopt training within Stage One . Preparation groups are held across two locations, one based in Oxford and the other in Woodley. The content of this training is constantly reviewed to keep up to date with current research and practice within adoption. This includes one half day virtual workshop with a focus upon reflection and loss, followed by a three day in person training and workshop event which focusses on material to support applicants with their understanding and preparation to adopt.

All applicants who attend the Preparation to Adopt training will have written feedback on their participation and understanding prepared by the group facilitators.

All applicants who have previously adopted will be invited to attend Adopt Thames Valley's Preparation to Adopt groups. However, if their adoption was in the last 5 years attendance is not

essential. The applicant/s ongoing training since last approval, can also be taken into consideration when making this decision.

All applicants who are registered foster carers will be invited to attend Adopt Thames Valleys Preparation to Adopt groups. Attendance should be prioritised, however if attendance is not viable for practical reasons (e.g. childcare responsibilities) then the allocated social worker will need to undertake specific/ focused training with them regarding adoption.

3.4 Stage One decision

Adopt Thames Valley must gather Stage One information and decide as to whether the prospective adopter is suitable to progress to Stage Two of the adoption assessment process. Our agency uses a checklist which will aid in informing this decision, within a period of eight weeks from the date on which the prospective adopter registered their interest in adopting a child (unless there are good reasons to extend that time period). If the time period is extended, the reasons must be recorded on the prospective adopter's case record, along with supporting evidence.

Where the Stage One decision is that the prospective adopter is not suitable to progress to stage two, the prospective adopter must be provided with a clear written explanation of the reasons why they will not be able to proceed to Stage Two. The Stage One decision may be made notwithstanding that not all of the required Stage One information has been gathered. Prospective adopters who wish to complain about this decision may make a complaint using the agency's local complaints procedure. The Independent Review Mechanism is not available for decisions made during Stage One.

Where the Stage One Decision is that the prospective adopter might be suitable to progress to stage two, the prospective adopter must be advised of the decision and that they have six months in which to notify the agency if they wish to proceed to Stage Two – the Assessment Stage.

If the prospective adopters provide notification of their wish to proceed outside this six months' time limit, they will need to restart Stage One. They should be contacted within five working days of their notification and offered a re-entry interview. The Stage One Plan should consider activities undertaken previously.

4. Sharing Information for the Purposes of Foster Carer / connected carers/ previously approved adopters

4.1 Information Sharing

Sharing information about a person that is held in their existing foster carer or adopter records is permitted for the purposes of informing a new assessment of a person's suitability to foster or adopt. For instance, if previous partners have been interviewed in the past to verify facts, and the current assessing social worker is satisfied with the records in respect of these interviews, it should not be necessary to repeat the interviews if no further information is required. The assessing social worker should, however, satisfy themselves as to the quality and continuing relevance of the information before using it to inform the current assessment.

Information that should be shared, upon request, in order to inform a new assessment of a person's suitability to foster or adopt includes:

- The report of the original assessment of the person's suitability to foster or adopt (if it is considered by the body requesting the information to be recent enough to be relevant);

- A copy of the report of the last review of the individual's continuing suitability to foster or adopt and any other review report considered useful to understanding the person's current suitability to foster or adopt;
- Details of any concerns about standards of practice and what if anything is being done/has been done to address them;
- Details of allegations made against the foster carer/adopter or their household members; and
- Any other information considered to be relevant to the assessment of the person's suitability to foster/adopt.

4.2 Consent

Information should only be shared with the informed, explicit consent of all parties referred to in the information, including young people where they have sufficient understanding to consent to the sharing of their information (if they do not have sufficient understanding, the consent of a person with Parental Responsibility would need to be obtained). This means that the person giving consent needs to understand why their information is to be shared, what will be shared, who will see their information, the purpose to which it will be put and the implications of sharing that information.

If consent is refused, Adopt Thames Valley, or alternative adoption agency, should consider whether there is any information in the records that is a cause for concern. Any information about an applicant's conduct or suitability to foster/adopt that has caused concern should be shared even if the individual has refused consent. If there are no such concerns, and the individual has refused consent, information should not be shared. This may require documents to be redacted to remove information relating to individuals who have refused consent.

Requests for access to information should be accompanied by the written consent of the applicant to the sharing of their information.

4.3 Timescales

The receiving service should acknowledge the request within two working days, seek consent from all others referred to in the information within five working days and the information, redacted where necessary, should be provided within fifteen working days.

5. Stage Two – The Assessment Process

5.1 Purpose and Process

Where the Stage One decision is that the prospective adopter/s are suitable to progress to stage two and they have notified the agency that they wish to proceed, the application then proceeds to Stage Two of the process - the assessment process.

This stage should begin with a meeting between the prospective adopter and the allocated social worker. The social worker should explain how Stage Two will operate and what will be required of the prospective adopter. Information about the decision-making process and the role of the Adoption Panel and the Independent Review Mechanism should be shared.

A decision must be reached as to whether the prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child within **sixteen weeks** of the date on which the agency received the prospective adopter's notification that they wish to proceed with the assessment process (six months if there are exceptional circumstances). Reasons for any extensions should be recorded on the prospective adopter's case file.

Please note that within the sixteen-week timescale, presentation of the case to approval panel, panel minute write up and ADM decision making is inclusive, therefore these considerations need to be built into your stage two agreement (see below)

Stage Two will end with the Agency Decision Maker's decision about the suitability of the prospective adopter to adopt a child.

5.2 Prospective Adopter Assessment Agreement

A written agreement must be entered into with the prospective adopter ('the prospective adopter assessment agreement') which must include the following:

- The procedure for assessing the prospective adopter's suitability to adopt a child;
- Any applicable timescales;
- The arrangements for the prospective adopter to receive any additional counselling or preparation for adoption;
- Details of any training that the prospective adopter has agreed to undertake; and
- Any other matters which the agency considers relevant.

5.3 Assessment

In conducting the Stage Two assessment, the social worker should analyse and consider the information they ascertain from and about the prospective adopter, including any issues identified during the adoption preparation. The approach should be objective and inquiring, with information evaluated and its accuracy and consistency checked. The assessment must be conducted by a qualified social worker with suitable experience (see Adoption Panel Procedure, Reports to Adoption Panel).

The assessment will comprise a series of interviews, of which a minimum of four home visit (or 8 hours) will take place in the applicants' home. Other assessment sessions can be held on a virtual basis via MS Teams. Applicants should be interviewed at least once both individually and with their partner, and all other members of the household will also be interviewed, including the children.

The areas covered in interviews will follow the subject areas:

- Individual profiles of all members of the household, including a photograph and physical description, racial origin, cultural and linguistic background, religious persuasion, personality and interests, relationship (if any) to the child;
- Information about the home, the local community and the neighbourhood;
- Details of education and employment - past and present;
- Income and expenditure;
- Details of past and present relationships;
- Motivation to adopt/childlessness;
- Parenting capacity, experience of being parented and experience with children;
- Support network, - Adopt Thames Valley facilitate support network meetings during Stage Two to assist with comprehensive family and friends support plans. This may be conducted via video call, or in person;

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- Views and feelings about adoption and its significance, attitudes to birth families and approach to openness in adoption and contact;
- Views about parental responsibility and what it means;
- Views about a suitable home environment for the child;
- Views about the importance and value of education;
- Views and feelings about the importance of a child's religious and cultural upbringing;
- Any other information which indicates how the prospective adopter and anybody else living in the household is likely to relate to a child placed for adoption;
- Any other relevant information which might assist Adopt Thames Valley

As part of the assessment:

- A family tree and Chronology of key events in the applicant's life from birth must be compiled, showing their educational, employment, marital and/or relationship history and addresses for the previous 10 years; any gaps and/or unusual patterns should be explored;
- All information provided by the applicant must be independently verified where possible, by checking it against other sources such as referees.
- Where an applicant has been divorced or separated, factors contributing to the breakdown of the relationship should be verified. This applies equally to significant relationships between couples who are not married;
- The adequacy and safety of the prospective adoptive home and transport will be assessed;
- Where the applicants have pets, a risk assessment should be conducted, and any associated risks should be considered about the pet itself and where the pet is kept. Where necessary, an independent assessment should be undertaken by a vet to establish whether the dog falls within the scope of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

The assessment will consider the likely need for adoption support services of the prospective adopters and any member of their family - see Adoption Support Services. As part of this, the family's finances and the criteria for financial support should also be discussed.

Where the prospective adopters live in another local authority area, the social worker should ascertain the extent of any support services identified as necessary in their local area.

The assessment will also cover the applicants' willingness to notify Adopt Thames Valley if the adopted child dies during childhood or soon afterwards, their views on post-placement and post-adoption contact and their willingness to pass on information to birth parents about the progress of the adopted child. These issues should be specifically reported on to the Adoption Panel.

5.4 Early Permanence (Fostering for Adoption)

Discussion should take place with the prospective adopter about whether they may be interested in fostering a child for whom adoption is thought to be a likely outcome. This can be where, although the child's plan is likely to become adoption, other options have not yet been ruled out for that child. There is no need for the agency to assess and approve the prospective adopter as a temporary foster carer at the same time as they are conducting the adopter approval process. The child's local authority can arrange for the foster care assessment and approval of an approved adopter. The agency should indicate on the Prospective Adopter's Report if the prospective adopter is interested

in Fostering for Adoption. This will allow prospective adopters to be matched with a child requiring a Fostering for Adoption placement.

Fostering for Adoption carers should have access to appropriate supplementary/ specific preparation sessions as well as the usual preparation and training package available to all adopters. Meeting other adopters who have experience of these types of placements is an important part of this preparation. There should be appropriate exploration of the capacity of the foster carers/prospective adopters to manage the emotional and practical tasks of being foster carers until and if placement for adoption is agreed by the court. It is important to ensure that carers are fully informed about the nature of the placement, their role in that placement as foster carers and their understanding of the possibility of the court deciding to pursue an alternative plan to adoption.

6. Fast-Track Procedure for Approved Foster Carers and Previous Adopters Who Wish to Adopt

The requirements are modified for applicants who are approved foster carers or previous adopters. (This does not apply to Connected Persons or to prospective adopters given temporary approval as foster carers, under the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 (as amended)).

The need for checks and references should be assessed in each individual case. This may depend on the time since approval and, in the case of foster carers, the time since a child was placed with them.

There is no requirement to provide counselling, information and preparation for adoption. However, this needs to be assessed on an individual basis.

The preliminary Stage One decision is not necessary, and the assessment process progresses straight to preparation of the Prospective Adopter's Report.

Any necessary additional training should be provided, such as where the prospective adopters are seeking to adopt a child with needs which are different to those of the child they have fostered/adopted.

The decision as to whether the prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child must be made within sixteen weeks of the date on which the prospective adopter registered their interest in adopting a child. This includes the time taken to access information from adoption agencies and fostering services which have fifteen working days to provide such information.

Applicants who wish to be assessed as prospective adopter for a specific child:

If an applicant wishes to be assessed for a specific child, please follow the guidance outlined within the *FastTrack Assessment Guidance regarding Foster Carers, connected carers and Previously Approved Adopters*.

These assessments should be conducted on the Reg 30 F Coram template

7. Prospective Adopter's Report

The information gathered during Stage One and Stage Two including the checks and personal references, will form the basis of the Prospective Adopter's Report, together with any other relevant information.

All assessments with positive recommendations will proceed to Approval panel.

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Should concerns arise during assessment, the social worker should highlight any issues to their team manager. Where there are any issues of significant concern or where clarification is needed, the team manager may arrange for a second person to visit the prospective adopter (Second Opinion visit) to discuss these but must remain mindful of the time frame for Stage Two. The second person could be a team manager or another adoption social worker, and they should be provided with a draft copy of the Prospective Adopter Report, clearly identifying areas which need further consideration. A visit by another person provides a second opinion where necessary before the report to the panel is finalised in cases where clarification is needed but should not be routinely conducted. The author of the report and the countersigning officer should both sign and date the report and confirm that they are suitably qualified to prepare the report.

Where information received during the assessment leads the agency to consider that the prospective adopter is unlikely to be considered suitable to adopt a child, a 'brief Prospective Adopter's Report' may be prepared regardless of whether or not all the required assessment information has been obtained. A decision not to complete the full assessment is a serious step to take and advice should first be sought from the Team Manager. Depending on the nature of the information, advice may also need to be sought from the agency's medical adviser or legal adviser, or both. The concerns should be explained to the prospective adopter and they should be offered counselling, involving other professionals as appropriate. As a result of the counselling and advice, the prospective adopter may decide to withdraw their application. If they decide not to withdraw their application, the brief prospective adopter's report should be prepared.

Reports should address anti-discriminatory practice issues. It should contain a summary of the assessed strengths and weaknesses of the applicants; potential risk factors should be highlighted.

The report will include a summary by the Medical Adviser of the health report obtained on the applicant/s.

The Report will also include the agency's assessment of the prospective adopter's suitability to adopt together with an opinion of the type of placement likely to be provided successfully.

When the Prospective Adopter's Report is finalised, a copy should be sent to the applicants, and they must be notified that the application is to be referred to the Adoption Panel. The applicants should be invited to send any observations in writing within five working days, beginning with the date on which the notification was sent. (This timescale may be extended in exceptional circumstances.) At the end of the five working days (or, where that timescale is extended by the adoption agency, as soon as possible after the prospective adopter's observations are received) the following must be sent to the Adoption Panel:

- A signed and final version of the Prospective Adopter's Report Part 1 and 2 and the prospective adopter's observations thereon.
- Part 2 of the PAR should contain a summary of all references received, including voluntary references, counselling, school and ex-partner. To include any explanations regarding decisions for checks or references not obtained and any training feedback.
- Where the Agency Medical Adviser so advises, the medical report on the prospective adopter. Where the medical advice is over 6 months old, an updated self-declaration form will be submitted;
- Any delay reasons to assessment timescales should be recorded in PAR part 2
- Any other relevant information obtained by the agency.

The date of the Adoption Panel meeting will be communicated to the applicants as soon as possible, together with an invitation to attend the Panel during consideration of the report.

The applicants should also be advised of their right to attend the meeting of the Adoption Panel, which considers their application. They should be provided with written information about the Panel process, its membership, who will attend and their respective roles. If the applicants know a particular Panel member, the applicants may request that the Panel member stand down. (Panel members are in any event expected to declare an interest in these circumstances - see **Adoption Panel Procedure**.)

8. The Panel Recommendation

The assessing social worker will attend the Panel meeting (and their manager where appropriate), together with the applicants if they so wish. The decision to attend rests with the applicants and a wish not to attend will not prejudice consideration of their application.

Applicants who decide they wish to attend should be fully prepared as to the procedure prior to their attendance (see **Section 7, Prospective Adopter's Report**).

The Panel will consider the Prospective Adopter's Report together with all the supporting documentation (see **Section 7, Prospective Adopter's Report**), and make a recommendation to the **Agency Decision Maker (Adoption)** regarding the suitability of the applicant to adopt a child. The Panel may request the agency to obtain any other relevant information which it considers necessary and may obtain legal advice as it considers necessary in relation to the case.

Where, during the Stage Two Assessment stage, the agency was of the opinion that the prospective adopter is unlikely to be suitable to adopt, and prepared a brief Prospective Adopter's Report without having obtained all the assessment information, then the Adoption Panel must **either** request the preparation of a full Prospective Adopter's Report having obtained all the assessment information, **or** recommend that the prospective adopter is not suitable to adopt.

The recommendation will be recorded in writing and, where approval is recommended, the record will include any advice given about the number of children the prospective adopter may be suitable to adopt, their age range, gender, needs and background.

Reasons for the recommendations and any advice as set out above will also be recorded in the Panel's minutes.

The adoption worker undertaking the assessment will advise the applicant of the Panel recommendation within 24 hours of the Panel meeting. This will be verbally, by telephone or, where appropriate, a home visit.

After the panel recommendation

The decision as to whether the prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child must be made within four months of the date on which the agency received the prospective adopter's notification that they wished to proceed with the assessment process.

The decision may be delayed:

- Where there are exceptional circumstances which mean that the decision cannot be made within that time; or
- Upon the request of the prospective adopter.

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If the decision is delayed, the reasons must be recorded on the prospective adopter's case record, along with supporting evidence.

The Agency Decision Maker (Adoption) will make a decision as to the suitability of the applicant, and express a view on any Panel advice given, based on the reports presented to the Adoption Panel and the minutes detailing the Panel's recommendation and advice.

Where the Agency Decision Maker (Adoption) is minded to disagree with the Panel recommendation, they must first discuss the case with another senior officer with relevant experience, who must not be a Panel member, before arriving at a final decision. This discussion must be recorded and placed on the child's and the prospective adopter's Adoption Case Record.

The decision must be made within seven working days of the Adoption Panel meeting and must be recorded, together with reasons.

The Panel Administrator will arrange notification of the decision, signed by the Agency Decision Maker (Adoption), within five working days of the decision.

Where the decision is to approve the prospective adopter, they should be provided with information which explains the process of matching and the role of Adopt Thames Valley (**delivered via a Stage 3 meeting**)

Where the decision differs from the recommendation of the Adoption Panel, a copy of the Panel recommendation will be sent to the applicant/s with the written notification of the decision.

All successful applicants will be allocated an adoption link worker whose task is to support the adopters through the period of waiting for a placement, identify any further training needs, arrange updated medical examinations as requested by the Medical Adviser, consider any potential matches and discuss any such matches with the approved adopters before a match is presented to the Adoption Panel. Regular contact between link workers and prospective adopters is expected, at a minimum of six weekly.

Approved adopters will be asked to be available for children from the local authority area in need of an adoptive placement for a period of 12 weeks, after which they will be given consent to access national profiles of children (via the website Linkmaker).

They will also be informed of local support groups and training opportunities and be advised of their responsibility to maintain links with the adoption link worker and keep them informed of any significant changes in their situation.

Approved prospective adopters should be encouraged to identify children they might be suitable to adopt. This can be through attending Adoption Activity/ Play days and Exchange events.

9. Representations / Independent Review Procedure

If a decision is made not to approve an application, the applicant will be advised that if they wish to challenge the decision, representations should be submitted within forty working days either directly to the agency or they may request a referral to the Independent Review Mechanism.

After the forty working day period has expired, the Agency Decision Maker must proceed to make a decision on the suitability of the prospective adopter to adopt.

Where the agency receives representations from the prospective adopter within forty working days, the Agency Decision Maker may consider the representations and may invite the prospective adopter to meet to discuss their case. The Agency Decision Maker may, instead, refer the case to

the adoption panel for further consideration. Where the case is referred to the panel, the panel must consider the case again and make a fresh recommendation as to the suitability of the prospective adopter to adopt a child. The prospective adopter must be invited to attend the panel meeting to answer any questions the adoption panel may have.

The Panel Administrator will advise the applicant within 7 days of the date of the Panel meeting when they can attend or their written representations will be considered.

In these circumstances, applicants who wish to attend the meeting of the Adoption Panel can arrange for a friend or supporter to accompany them.

After considering the representations, the Panel will make further recommendations either confirming or amending their previous views, which the Agency Decision Maker will consider before a final decision is made.

Written notice of the final decision, together with reasons, must be sent to the applicant as soon as possible after the decision and, in any event, within seven working days of the Panel meeting. A copy of the Adoption Panel's further recommendation must also be sent, if different from the decision.

Where the decision is still to refuse the application, a copy of the report to the Panel, the Panel's recommendation and the decision, with reasons, must be retained on the applicant's Adoption Case Record.

If the applicant decides to refer the matter to an Independent Review, the relevant Panel reports, any new information obtained since the Panel meeting, a record of the decision made and reasons, a copy of the written notification of the decision and a copy of the Panel minute, if different, will be sent to the Independent Review within 10 working days of their written request (see also: **GOV.UK, Prepare for a review panel: adopters and foster carers**).

The procedure for the Independent Review Mechanism conducted by Coram Children's Legal Centre on behalf of the Department for Education. See **Independent Review Mechanism England**; the applicant and a representative of Adopt Thames Valley will be invited to attend the Independent Review.

After considering the representations, the Independent Review may make a recommendation, which the **Agency Decision Maker** will consider before a final decision is made.

Written notice of the final decision, together with reasons, must be sent to the applicant as soon as possible after the decision and, in any event, within seven working days of the receipt of the Independent Review recommendation.

A copy of the report to the Panel, the Panel's recommendation and the decision to refuse an application must be retained on the applicant's Adoption Case Record.

In respect of a case referred to the independent review panel, the Secretary of State must also be given written notification of the decision.

10. Prospective Adopter's Case Record

A prospective adopter's case record must be set up as soon as the registration of interest is accepted.

ATVs case record retention policy for Prospective adopters is as follows:

- Adopters withdrawn pre-Stage One – 3 years from closure date

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- Approved Adopter – one hundred years from closure date
- Adopters entering Stage One but not approved at panel – 10 years from closure date
- Adopted children – one hundred years from closure date
- Adopted contact arrangements – one hundred years from closure date
- Adoption support – one hundred years from closure date
- Children looked after – 75 years from point of closure.

DBS information

Information which has been obtained from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) should be retained on the Prospective Adopter's Case Record for a limited time only, in line with the above record retention duration.

11. Stage 3 Meeting

Where a prospective adopter has been approved as suitable to adopt a child, a Prospective Adopter Matching Plan, must be prepared, in consultation with the prospective adopter, which includes:

- Information about the duties of Adopt Thames Valley in respect of placements and reviews;
- Information about the role of the prospective adopter in identifying a child for whom they would be an appropriate adopter;
- Information about the process for making a representation (including a complaint); and
- Any other matters that the agency consider relevant.

Templates are available to assist with stage 3 meetings.

12. Annual Review of Prospective Adopters' Approval

Adopters' approvals will be reviewed annually (Every 12 months) by means of a report from the adoption link worker, together with any comments on the report from the prospective adopters.

If the prospective adopters are considered no longer suitable, the same procedure should be followed as set out in **Section 9, Representations / Independent Review Procedure**.

13. Review of Prospective Adopters checks, references and notifications prior to Adoption Matching panel

Once a potentially suitable adoption match with an adoptive child/ren has been identified, via a matching meeting, the formal matching procedures will be initiated. In order to proceed to matching panel, the following checks/ references and notifications must be completed. Any new information produced as a result of these must be considered and analysed before proceeding to matching panel to ensure continued suitability to adopt.

DBS- the date of the DBS certificate for the prospective adopter must be within the last 2 years

Health – The advice provided by the agency medical adviser must have been issued within the last 2 years. If the advice is older than 2 years, or there have been significant changes to health status, ATV require new advice. N.B In most circumstances this can be obtained via the AH2 form, unless there are significant changes in health, in which case AH1 form and in person appointment required.

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In all cases where the original medical advice is over 6 months old, all prospective adopters will be asked to complete a self-declaration of any changes to their physical or emotional health status.

Notification to GP Surgery- A standard letter template will be sent to the applicant/s GP surgery via recorded delivery notifying them with the intention to place a child with the applicant/s for adoption. They will be asked to inform ATV of any significant changes to the applicant's health status since approval.

Local Authority checks- an updated check will be required from the Local Authority in which the prospective adopter resides. If the applicant has moved local authority since their approval, the previous Local authority should be contacted for a check too. Please allow fifteen working days for a response.

LADO- If the applicant has continued to work with children since their adopter approval, an updated check will be required. Please allow fifteen working days for a response.

Finances- Prospective adopters should be asked if there have been any changes to their financial situation since approval.

If the prospective adopter has been approved for over 6 months, an updated financial assessment form should be completed. This will require updated credit scores and viewing of the last 3 months statements, savings accounts and any debt.

Children residing in the home- Prospective adopters should be asked if there have been any changes to the circumstances of any children residing in the home. This should include any information about their health, development or any additional support required. The child/ren's understanding of the plans for adoption must be ascertained, alongside any preparatory work which has been completed.

Any references sought from education settings, or relevant professionals must be updated if they are over 6 months old.

The Home - A review of the previous health and safety check must be completed prior to panel. Any changes to the home since adopter approval must be assessed. In addition, any specific age/development requirements for the child/ren identified must be noted, and all previous actions to have been completed.

Support Network meeting- a date for a second support network meeting must be scheduled to place shortly after the matching panel. This meeting is to discuss the specific needs of the child/ren identified for adoption and provide updated contact details for any safeguarding concerns.

Panel Recommendations- Review panel recommendations and whether actioned

Annual Reviews- All prospective adopters must have an annual review at 12 months since their adoption approval. This is inclusive of any prospective adopters who have had a child placed with them via Early Permanence.