



Fostering for Adoption A child-centred solution

A guide for prospective
FfA carers

*Children need a loving and secure home
that they experience as their “forever family”.*

Most people who are interested in adoption readily recognise that children need a loving and secure home that they experience as their “forever family” as quickly as possible. When a child cannot live with their birth parents or other family members, it is the responsibility of local authorities and the courts to ensure that a new family is found with the minimum of delay. Children should not have to wait.

There has been great concern over recent years that waiting is exactly what children have to do. It takes far too long for the adults who have responsibility to make their plans and decisions. A lot of effort is being put into reforming local authorities’ children’s services, the courts and other parts of the system to ensure that, as a whole, it operates in a more timely way and to look at how to achieve early permanence for a child who cannot remain in their birth family. At the end of this process, when the court has sufficient information to reach a decision, children will get what they need – to become a member of a loving family that will be their family for the rest of their life, whether that means being adopted or returning to the care of their birth family.

We couldn’t picture starting a family any other way. It was not without its challenges and stresses, but the rewards that we have got (all the firsts we have had, the joy of seeing our baby grow from being a day old and building such a strong attachment) could never be beaten. We are so grateful to have had this opportunity and feel blessed that it has happened.

FfA carer

Fostering for Adoption (FfA) is one part of that solution and is a route to achieving early permanence (an umbrella term which covers the placement of a child through FfA or concurrent planning – see below) for a child. Early permanence for vulnerable children has become a priority for social workers, and placements can be made with either FfA carers or concurrent

planning carers. Some agencies are only recruiting FfA carers, others only recruit concurrent carers and some are recruiting both. As practice is developing, the way in which these routes to early permanence work means they can be very similar in practice.

What is FfA and how does it differ from concurrent planning?

Concurrent planning and FfA are two routes to achieving early permanence for a child who cannot be cared for by their parents or extended family. Both involve a child being placed with approved prospective adopters who are willing to act as foster

carers during the time that the court is considering the evidence to decide whether or not the child can go home or whether s/he should be adopted.

The concurrent planning model in England was developed in the 1990s and has evolved over time. Concurrent carers are assessed for approval as foster carers under the Fostering Regulations as well as adopters. Once they have been dually approved for both roles, they will then wait for a child to be identified where the local authority thinks that adoption may need to be the plan for the child but has not completed all the necessary work with the birth parents to reach this decision. Therefore the agreed and appropriate plan for the child is for them to be placed in foster care until the court makes its decision about adoption. Concurrent planning is only used if the local authority believes that the child’s parents and extended family are unlikely to be able to care for the child; but until the court has considered all the evidence and made its decision, this is not certain.

During the fostering phase, the local authority will have agreed a plan with the birth parent about what changes would be needed for the child to be returned to their parent’s care which the foster carer would be expected to support. The local authority will also want to consider any relatives who might offer the child a home if s/he cannot return to the care of parents as soon as possible – if possible before approaching a concurrent planning carer to consider a placement. Carers are usually expected to meet with the birth parents and support the child having contact with them as part of the ongoing assessment and to ensure that if the child is returned to the family, there is already a good relationship to build on. You should ask your social worker for information about the availability of concurrent projects in their agency, or locally if this is something you are interested in.

Since FfA was introduced, the concept of early permanence has evolved. In FfA placements the local authority has already completed all assessments of the parents and the extended family and has reached a clear view that the child will need to be adopted at the end of court proceedings. However, the judge will not have made his/her decision and sometimes there are unexpected developments such as a previously unknown relative asking to be considered.

Generally speaking, FfA placements are expected to be resolved via the courts more quickly than concurrent planning placements. However, this is not always the case and some concurrent planning placements are sorted out fairly smoothly whereas some FfA placements become more protracted if a relative appears on the scene and asks to be considered as a long-term carer for the child.

Each situation has to be considered individually, and carers who take on such placements need to understand the uncertainties involved alongside being aware of the enormous satisfaction of offering these vulnerable babies and young children the possibility of developing a secure attachment from the earliest possible moment, which does not need to be broken. Until the court has made a final decision, the child remains a foster child and there is always a small possibility that s/he will return to the care of parents or extended family members.

Most children placed with FfA carers – similar to concurrent planning families – will be adopted by them, but until the court has weighed all the information, this is not certain.

If a child needs a placement that offers early permanence, the local authority can either consider a prospective adopter who is already dually approved as a foster carer, or approach an approved adopter who they think might be a good match for the child and who has expressed an interest in offering FfA. If the adopter agrees to foster the child whilst the court is still considering the evidence, they can be temporarily approved as foster carers for that specific child by the local authority. However, it is important that FfA carers fully understand that until the court has completed its consideration of all the evidence, there might still be a change of plan, and the child might be returned to his/her parents' or relative's care.

If the court agrees that the child should be adopted (whether this is a FfA placement or concurrent planning placement) and the adoption agency approves the “match” between the carers as adopters and the child, the placement then becomes an adoption placement.

FfA and concurrent planning have the same advantages for the child:

- They are placed with foster carers who may become their adopters and so experience fewer moves in care and can make secure attachments from as early as possible.
- It avoids the damage caused by ending the relationships they have developed with their temporary foster carers, which they will have experienced as their primary parenting relationship.
- It provides added stability and security in their early lives at a time of uncertainty.

Each of these advantages will also be a benefit for the adopters if they are able to adopt the child. In addition, they will experience the milestones that they would otherwise have missed, and will have the joy of caring for a vulnerable young

child from as early as possible – sometimes direct from hospital after birth. But this does require adopters to be extremely child centered and to accept that, for some babies/young children, the best placement will be to return to the care of a family member. This requires a very generous spirit. Many adopters who have gone through this process say that even if their child is returned to his/her parents, which would be a painful loss for them, they will have the comfort of knowing that they gave the baby or young child the best possible start.

It may also be that some birth parents will understand these advantages for their child as well, even if their intention is to prove that they can take care of the child themselves. They may find it reassuring to know that the devoted care their child has been receiving will continue when they have been adopted by the carers whom they have got to know and respect.

Why not place the child directly for adoption?

Unless the parents of the child are asking for their child to be adopted and are willing to give their consent, it is necessary for the court to dispense with their consent. This requires careful evidence being gathered for the court to consider before a decision on such an important and life-changing matter can be made. Although the welfare of the child will be the court's primary consideration, if the child can be provided with a safe and caring home within his /her family, this is generally seen as the best plan.

A child can be placed directly with adopters if the parents have decided they want their child to be placed for adoption, and will give their legally authorised consent once the child is over six weeks old and no other family member has expressed interest in caring for the child.

However, in most situations it is the local authority that will decide that adoption is going to be the right plan for the child and if the parents do not agree with this plan, it is then for the court to decide whether s/he can be placed for adoption. The local authority cannot act in any way that

Whilst you need to be utterly committed to the child, and excited about the possibility of adopting, you also need to be fully aware of the rights of both birth parents and children, and the court's ultimate role in decision-making. You need to be wanting the best for the child even if the best is not being with you, as however great adoption is, it does have a huge impact for the child and can't be taken lightly.

FFA carer

prejudges the outcome of the court's decision, and that includes making an adoption placement. The local authority must place the child with foster carers until the court's decision is made, and it is important that where this is with FfA carers, they understand what being foster carers during the court proceedings will entail.

Why does the process of deciding whether adoption is the right outcome take so long?

Whilst the needs of children must be everybody's primary interest, there are other people whose rights need to be considered in determining what the right plan should be. Firstly, there are the birth parents, and local authorities are required to place a high priority on working with them to see if the problems they face as parents can be resolved so that they can resume the care of their child. There may also be other family members who might want to offer the child a home because they are "family". There will be a number of options in deciding what the best alternative placement might be and these will need to be thoroughly tested. All of this takes time to be done in a way that is fair, lawful and evidence-based.

We hadn't planned to adopt through FfA and had not heard of it. We already had two children and hadn't planned to extend our family further. The local authority contacted us about our third child because we had already adopted a full sibling. We learned about FfA at that point, and wanted to adopt our third child because we strongly believed he should be with his sister. FfA carer

During this process, the child will usually be placed with temporary foster carers, and sometimes that can mean moving between more than one set of foster carers. Adults and professionals will know that these are temporary placements but young children will not. They will quickly make attachments that will then have to be broken if they

are moved to adopters. Slightly older children may understand that this is not a "forever family" and this realisation may cause them anxiety and distress. This will only be made more difficult when an adoptive family is finally found and the relationship the child has made with their foster carers comes to a fairly abrupt end.

Once the local authority has gathered all its evidence and submitted it to the court, there will be an opportunity for the birth parents to present their case and the court will also appoint a Children's Guardian to present an independent view of what is best for the child. Therefore, even when the local authority has decided, what in its view is the best outcome, there may be other points of view for the court to consider.

Finding child-centred solutions to managing this process is not easy. Adoption is a profound legal, emotional and life-long issue. It is a process that needs to be conducted fairly, justly and in a way that ensures there is confidence that, while it is very painful, it is the right decision for the child, and it will make sense to the child when s/he grows up and asks why s/he was adopted.

FfA is the best plan for some children as it provides the child with a temporary foster placement but with the potential for this to become their permanent home if they need to be adopted.

When is it right for children to be placed through FfA?

A FfA placement should only be made where there is clear evidence available to the local authority that there is very little likelihood that the birth parents can resolve their problems or that any other family members can take care of the child. This evidence will need to be substantial; this usually means that either the parents have had other children placed for adoption in the past and their circumstances have not changed at the time of the birth of the new child, or an early assessment of the parents has shown that they lack the capacity to change their behaviours and that there is a risk that the child would suffer significant harm if allowed to remain with them. The local authority will also need to be sure that there are no known family members who are suitable and able to care for the child.

Where there are older siblings who have already been adopted or placed for adoption, local authorities would usually approach the adopters of those children first to see if they are in a position to adopt the child so that s/he can grow up with his or her brothers or sisters, and if so whether they feel able to offer an FfA placement. In these situations the needs of the adopted children in the family will be considered by everyone before deciding whether an FfA placement will be right for all the children.

Where the mother or both parents have requested that their child should be placed for adoption but there are still checks to be made – e.g. with other relatives – before they can give their formal consent, FfA may be the best placement to ensure that the child does not have to experience a temporary foster placement before joining his/her forever family. The courts would not usually be involved in these situations unless there is a subsequent challenge from the birth father or a family member who was not aware of the proposed adoption.

The most important consideration is that these placements place the burden of uncertainty on

the adults who have to accept the possibility of loss. For the babies and children it is a win/win scenario: either they will already be attaching to the carers who will adopt them and offer a life-long commitment, or they will return home to the care of a family member able to give them loving care whilst remaining within their family network.

What do the courts think about FfA?

The local authority is required by legislation to consider FfA whenever they are considering adoption as the plan to achieve permanence for a child. The local authority must be transparent and open in what it is doing when it makes a FfA placement. It must inform the court, the birth parents and all those who have a direct interest in the child about its plan. It must explain why it is making the placement; this must include acknowledging that the court may not approve of adoption as the plan and the child may in the end return to their parent or other family members.

The court will be aware that FfA carers are acting as local authority foster carers and would only become the child's adoptive parents if adoption is agreed as the plan for the child. Whilst prospective adopters are acting as FfA carers they do not have any rights in relation to the child until the plan for adoption has been approved.

Although this leaflet has explained the uncertainties of FfA placements, it is important to add that because the local authority generally has a great deal of information about the child's parents before beginning court proceedings, they have a very good idea of the likely long-term outcome. If, in their judgement, adoption of the child will be the end result, this is usually the case, and most FfA children are adopted by their carers. Whilst this cannot be taken for granted, it is therefore usually the end result.

Are there many children available for FfA?

Statistics about the number of children placed through FfA or concurrent planning have been collected in England since 2014. The most recently reported figures showed that 320 children were placed with a foster carer who was also an approved adopter in the year to March 2016 and there has been a year-on-year increase in these numbers. Some local authorities are still developing their use of FfA and have only placed a handful of children. Others have placed over 50 babies and young children since FfA placements were introduced in 2013.

You will need to ask what possibilities there are in the local authorities and voluntary adoption

My advice would be to get as much information as possible and make sure social services tell you all the rules and regulations. Make sure that you know exactly what is required of you and always ask for worst case scenarios so you know where things stand. I would say it is not for the fainthearted or overly emotional, but if you can do it, it is so good for the child's long-term security and well-being. FfA carer

agencies (VAAs) you make contact with. In some regions there are agreements made between local authorities and with VAAs so you could be asked to consider an FfA placement from a different agency to the one that is approving you for adoption. Several VAAs have also set up specific projects to recruit early permanence carers who can offer FfA or concurrent planning.

First4Adoption (www.first4adoption.org.uk) may also have information about agencies that are actively involved in FfA. Because of the nature of FfA placements, it is very likely that geographical considerations will be important in identifying suitable placements.

Routes to being approved as a FfA carer?

There are two ways for you to be approved as a FfA carer:

- **dual approval** – where your agency approves you as an adopter *and* as a foster carer, so that you could foster any child who the local authority feels would be suitable for an FfA placement after a matching process has taken place.
- **temporary approval** – where, after you have been approved to adopt, the local authority responsible for the child approves you as a temporary foster carer for that child. This approval continues until a decision is made about whether the child can be adopted and a match for adoption is made.

Preparation: Many agencies offer additional preparation to FfA and concurrent planning carers about the nature of these placements and what would be expected of the carers, as well as opportunities to meet experienced FfA or concurrent planning carers to hear about their experience at first hand. It is important that carers have the opportunity to discuss the issues and to understand the legal framework and the expectations of foster carers.

Assessment: Most agencies use the CoramBAAF Prospective Adopter's Report (PAR) which enables

Thanks to the training, we did feel like we were prepared for the foster care element. Once he was with us, it all felt very different and I don't think you can stress this difference enough to prospective parents considering this route. Sometimes it felt like decisions were being made in spite of us and it was as though we were the least important people in the whole situation. When you're caring for a child who you very much see as yours (even with the boundaries you try to set yourself), this can be very unsettling. FfA carer

them to assess your suitability to offer an FfA or concurrent planning placement at the same time as you are being assessed as adopters. Some people may have decided that they wish to be approved as FfA carers or concurrent planning carers before the assessment begins. However, it may also be possible to decide this during your assessment, once you have had opportunities to learn about the implications of acting as a foster carer during the time when the case

the local authority and have some legal rights in relation to the child. That is not the case with foster carers, where the local authority usually shares PR with the birth parents and the foster carers have no legal rights in relation to the child.

In practice, foster carers are acting on behalf of the local authority. The local authority will have many legal duties and obligations and they will expect you to work with them in making sure that these obligations are fulfilled. They will review the child's care on a regular basis to ensure that the child's needs are being met, and you will be part of the reviews. Social workers and other professionals will visit you and the child, and you will be expected to attend some other meetings and keep records about the child and your care of them.

As an adopter, once the child is placed with you for adoption, you will be encouraged to make most of the decisions for your child and the birth parents will no longer have any say in the care of their child. When the adoption order is made, the child's legal relationship with their birth parents is terminated, the child legally becomes a member of their adopted family and leaves the care of the local authority. In effect, the child becomes a full member of the adoptive family.

There are therefore significant differences and it is important to understand these. But from a child's perspective, the care they need is not defined by these different legal status definitions. FfA or concurrent planning carers generally understand this and give the child the loving care they need.

What contact do children have with their parents when they are in an FfA placement?

Contact can be very important for the parents and the child, but any arrangements for contact must be centred on the child's needs and welfare. The frequency and other arrangements for contact depend on how far decision-making about the child's future has got to in the courts and with the local authority. It is advised that contact should not take place more than three times a week and often it is less than that. Every situation is different and there are times when a court may order higher levels of contact, particularly if there is a change of plan where a return to birth parents or family members is being actively explored. However, above all, the child's welfare and needs are the most important things that the local authority must take into account when making any plan for contact.

Most agencies would prefer children to be taken to and from contact by their carers rather than being sent in a taxi with an escort and would

is being decided by the court.

Panel approval: If you are being dually approved, your suitability as a foster carer will be considered at the same panel where your application to adopt is being heard – if the agency operates a panel which is set up to consider both adoption and fostering applications. If not, your application will be considered at an adoption panel and also by a fostering panel.

If you are being approved as a temporary foster carer for a particular child who has been identified and discussed with you, this decision will be made by a "nominated officer", a senior manager in the local authority.

Your approval as a foster carer will be based on the evidence of your strengths, capacities and resources to take on the foster care role. It is very important that you fully understand what this means on a day-to-day basis. It is clearly very important that you can manage the period of uncertainty till the court makes its decision. You will be entitled to support from the local authority and your agency, if different, as well as the support you will want to have from your family and friends.

So what are the differences between being a foster carer and an adopter?

Although the care that you will give the child will be the same whether you are an adopter or a foster carer, there are a number of differences in the role you will have as a foster carer for the local authority. An important difference is that once a child is placed with prospective adopters, the adopters share parental responsibility (PR) with

look at how to arrange this to ensure your safety and confidentiality. Many carers also prefer to be involved and to feel that they can help the baby or child to manage the transition by taking the baby and having a handover to the parents at the beginning and end of contact – if that is manageable for everyone.

Unless there are particular risks involved, it will usually be expected that, at some stage of the adoption process, the carers will meet the birth parents so that both you as carers and the parents have a first-hand idea of each other, which is helpful for everyone, and for talking to the child as s/he grows up if the child is adopted by you. How this is managed depends on individual circumstances and the details and implications of this will be discussed with you.

Is FfA the right thing for me?

You will have thought long and hard about what it means for you to become an adopter. You may be at an early stage in the process or you may already have adopted a child or children. There are many factors to take into account when thinking about adoption.

There are also a number of things that you will need to think about in deciding whether FfA is right for you. This includes weighing up the advantages, the uncertainties and the demands of the fostering role. As we have highlighted, this is a different role, as you would be fostering under the direct supervision of the local authority. There is also the experience of living with the uncertainty of the outcome of the application to court, and whether you will be able to adopt the child. This impacts on people in different ways and you will need to think about how you might deal with this in a helpful and positive way.

It is important for anyone thinking about adoption to consider what support they might need, and where that might come from within their own support network or professionally. You also need to consider how you generally manage stressful and upsetting situations. There will be additional issues to be thought about that are specific to FfA placements, and you should try to identify what this might mean for you and then discuss this with your family, friends and the social workers you are meeting.

It is also important to think about the impact of a FfA placement on other people. If you already have a child or children in your family – adopted or birth children – you will need to pay particular attention to their needs and feelings. You would do this anyway if you were planning to adopt another child but there are specific issues about preparing

We had contact once per week with the birth mother only. This was done via social services as the birth mother did not want to meet us in person at this point. We met in a car park and handed over our son, then collected him an hour or two later... Contact proved difficult, as the birth mother did not engage every week. We had to be on standby each week and sometimes only got a confirmation that it was happening the morning of contact... On the times she did show up, it meant having to pass the child we saw as our own to someone else. This was another example of 'being OK in principle, but something quite different in practice'. That said, I am pleased we made the effort and rode the wave of contact, as we will be able to tell our son that we did this and made all efforts we possibly could to make his contact sessions a success. FfA carer

a child for that period of uncertainty in the fostering phase. There are also other people who will need to be consulted – other family members and close family friends. They may have questions and views themselves but they should also be a source of important support.

Will I receive any financial and practical support?

There will be a number of practical and financial considerations. You will already have thought about these in relation to adoption. In FfA and concurrent planning it is important to have a carer at home full time during the court proceedings in order to look after the baby or child and to manage contact and other meetings with professionals. This means it is important to plan how you will manage financially during this period.

If you meet the eligibility criteria for statutory adoption pay and leave (similar to statutory maternity benefits) you will be entitled to claim this from the time you start acting as an FfA or concurrent planning carer. You can claim this from the start of the

Our local authority were brilliant about checking the birth parents were attending first thing so I did not waste time driving down if they were not coming. I was glad to meet the birth parents and I think it helped them. The contact was well supervised by an adoption team member from the local authority so I felt OK about how the baby was. He slept pretty well in the car and I'd been able to ensure the contact was at a suitable time for that... When we did sit down with the parents later, although they were unhappy he had been taken away, they were glad that he was with us. I feel that the fact that we met a lot for contact was helpful to them in that respect. FfA carer

It's the most rewarding thing to do yet it's also a rollercoaster of a ride. It's not always easy, sometimes feeling as if it's never going to happen, but you need to focus and remember that you're doing it because it's the best thing for the child, not for you. As adults, we have the capabilities to cope with loss much better than a child can and it's only right that as adults we take the risks, not the child. FfA carer

fostering placement or delay taking it until the placement for adoption happens. However, you need to discuss these options with your employer to see whether there are advantages to taking it from the start of the placement.

You will also be entitled to a fostering allowance from the local

authority during the time you are acting as a foster carer and you will have access to other resources and services that are part of what the local authority makes available to children in care and foster carers. The local authority will discuss the specific arrangements that will apply in your circumstances. It is very important that you understand the practical arrangements to ensure that the financial support available will be manageable for you.

When the court authorises the adoption, then you will be assessed for adoption support by your agency and a plan will be made depending on that assessment. Financial support in the form of ongoing allowances is available but only if the child has particular additional needs and the local authority is in agreement. Additionally, there are some benefits that adopters can claim, for example, child tax credit, and the recently introduced Adoption Support Fund (www.adoption-support-fund.co.uk/parents), which

provides for limited financial support for identified therapeutic needs. Your agency will be able to advise you of these and any others.

Where next?

There are a lot of things to think about in FfA, and they need to be considered specifically in relation to you and your circumstances. If you think this is right for you, you will need to discuss this with your social worker and others in the agency; they will be able to give you information about the children who may be available for FfA and the support they will give you.

Whilst there is no doubt that FfA presents challenges for carers who put themselves forward, it is important not to forget the very significant advantages to the child and yourself of an early placement, with the real potential for it to be the basis of a life-long family relationship. The principle of FfA is that it is for the adults to manage the uncertainties and challenges so that the burden of uncertainty and waiting and more waiting is not carried by the child.

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