

Introduction



It is fundamental that supervising social workers and others working in fostering services understand the significance of the foster carer review process. This is clearly and helpfully set out by Cosis Brown (2015, p 89):

Foster carer reviews are central building blocks to monitoring and improving the quality of foster care and in so doing the quality of experience for foster children. They are important. Some would argue that they are more important than the foster carer assessment as it is through the foster carer review process that evidence is presented about the actual rather than the hypothetical quality of fostering that a foster carer has undertaken.

Foster carer reviews, if done rigorously and analytically, establish whether or not a foster carer and their household remain suitable to care for foster children and if their terms of approval remain appropriate. This in itself is crucial for safeguarding foster children's well-being, as described in detail by Biehal *et al* (2014).

As well as being a central safeguarding mechanism, reviews offer the opportunity to focus on the development of a foster carer and how a fostering service can facilitate that foster carer's work as well as their development. Reviews offer the possibility through the evaluation of a foster carer's fostering practice to praise them for the good work undertaken and the considerable contribution that they make to a foster child's life, their family and to the wider community.

As the term indicates, the review process constitutes a review of the period since the last review (often a year), bringing together all that has happened in that period, and results in a report that provides significant evidence about the foster carer's current strengths, abilities and areas for development. The review report is an important and significant document, and this good practice guide offers advice in relation to each of the different contributions that make up the review report.

In practice, we know that fostering services have some very different ideas about what a review process should look like. For those fostering services achieving the highest standards, the importance of the process is well understood and considerable time and effort is invested in making this a meaningful exercise. For others, the review is not given the attention that it warrants (Pearlman, 2012; Ingham, 2013) and is completed quickly and superficially in order to comply with the legal requirements.

CoramBAAF's Form FR (England) is a set of forms that are intended very much for the former, with a view to encouraging careful analysis, discussion and reflection. The

expectations that come with using Form FR are high, but not unrealistic, and this standard of practice is routinely achieved by a number of local authorities and independent fostering providers.

It is important to be clear about the purpose of the foster carer review, which is primarily to establish whether a foster carer and their household remain suitable to foster, and whether the terms of approval continue to be appropriate. There is an assumption that the foster carers were suitable at the time of approval, and the first, and subsequent reviews are designed to consider whether that remains the case. Whereas the assessment has considered someone's potential to foster, the review process considers the reality of what that means.

So, a review is not a reassessment of suitability, although conducting a review effectively will of course require some of the skills that are used in undertaking an assessment; and the social worker and reviewing officer will need to keep an open mind if evidence emerges to suggest that earlier judgements about suitability were flawed. Although the review is expected primarily to consider the review period, it is necessary to consider this in the context of everything that is known about the foster carer and their household, and to take account of historical information.

The chapters that follow provide some general information about legal and other frameworks under which reviews take place, and consider the planning of reviews with suggested timescales for each part of the process. A lengthy chapter then provides detailed guidance about the use of each individual report within Form FR, before looking at achieving the Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS). Subsequent chapters give consideration to reviewing the foster carer's health and looking at the policies that are relevant in undertaking a review. The final chapter brings the issues together in a short conclusion.

Terminology

Within this guide, the term "fostering service" is used to cover both local authority fostering services and independent fostering providers (IFPs). It discusses foster carer reviews, although equally might use the term foster home review.

While in practice different terms are used to describe fostering social workers, this guide prefers the term "supervising social worker", as this is the term used in the statutory guidance and throughout the National Minimum Standards. The term "supervising social worker" also accurately describes what that role should be.

The term "reviewing officer" is used to describe the person who chairs the review meeting, assuming that such a meeting takes place and that the Chair is not also the allocated supervising social worker. It should be noted that although the structure of some fostering services does not provide for a reviewing officer, this role is deemed necessary to achieve good practice (UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care, 1999) and this guidance does not therefore address circumstances where no such post or process exists.

Children of foster carers are mentioned in the text, and readers will need to use their judgement to take account of children on other legal orders such as special guardianship where, for all intents and purposes, they are in the same position as birth or adopted children. The term "foster carer" is used in the singular, but equally applies to couples who are fostering together.

Before using Form FR

This guide has been specifically written to assist fostering services that are using Form FR as the tool for conducting foster carer reviews. It is not normally permissible for CoramBAAF forms licence holders to amend the forms for their own use without having specific written permission, but in relation to Form FR, CoramBAAF is agreeable to relatively minor amendments to meet local requirements. This is because the regulations and guidance in relation to foster home reviews allow for considerable flexibility, and practice across fostering services is very varied. In practice, this means that fostering services may choose to remove any sections from the forms, or make *minor* wording changes to reflect local arrangements.

In a number of places in Form FR-A, the registered manager of the fostering service is invited to 'detail the policy requirements of your fostering service' in order to maximise the flexibility and usefulness of the forms. It is expected that the registered manager (or, with their express permission, someone appropriate within the service) should make these insertions and save them to the forms, before circulating them to practitioners within the fostering service. The registered manager is also permitted to replace the word "name" with "initials" in the forms wherever appropriate, and in line with that fostering service's policy.

Any such changes should be undertaken only after careful consideration of the legal requirements in relation to foster home reviews, and subject to a prominent note being clearly added to the form, that states:

This form has been amended by [name of fostering service] from the original CoramBAAF version, and CoramBAAF cannot be held responsible for any shortcomings or limitations arising from these amendments.

It is not permissible to add additional sections *within* the individual FR forms, although there is nothing to stop fostering services adding an entirely separate additional form or forms. Any additional forms should not carry the CoramBAAF logo, and should be labelled as '[Name of agency] additional form for use with CoramBAAF Form FR (England)'.

Fostering services may also wish to use a form of their own to replace any one or more of the individual forms in Form FR. This is permissible, again on the proviso that the alternative form does not carry the CoramBAAF logo, and has a clear heading that distinguishes it from Form FR.

Limitations of Form FR and this guide

Form FR was not designed with kinship foster carers or short break foster carers specifically in mind, although there is nothing within the forms that prevents them from being used with either of these groups of carers. Although the Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS) that are identified within the forms correlate to mainstream fostering, Form FR has been used with these groups on occasions within the pilot, and experience suggests that, if used flexibly, it can be an effective and appropriate tool for this purpose.

Individual fostering services will need to make their own decisions about how best to review kinship and short break foster carers according to their own preferences and the local situation. Unless there are indications of a demand for this, CoramBAAF does not intend to produce review forms specific to these particular groups of foster carers.

It should also be acknowledged that this guide does not consider the IRM process, since although this is important, it is separate from the actual foster carer review process. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that where a fostering service has undertaken a high quality review, this will reflect well on them, and the information contained within the papers will be helpful if the case ultimately reaches the IRM.