

Understanding the Assessment Process

What It Is:

This booklet has been produced by the Adoption Board with the help of parents representative groups, health boards, social workers and the Department of Health and Children.

This booklet is designed to inform you, as prospective adopters, of the various stages of the assessment process. The objectives of each stage of the assessment process are set out clearly, along with your involvement at each stage.

It is one of a number of documents available to prospective adopters on understanding the intercountry adoption assessment process. It should be read in conjunction with the Information Booklet on Intercountry Adoption (No.1 in this series).

What It's Not:

The booklet is not an exhaustive account of every aspect of the intercountry adoption assessment process.

It is not intended to be used as an interpretative guide to the legislative provisions of Adoption law in Ireland.

It does not represent the views of any particular group.

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1. Introduction

Your assessment will be based on a National Standardised Framework which has been developed for Intercountry Adoption Assessment Procedures.

The Standardised Framework was developed in 1999 following a detailed study of intercountry adoption assessment procedures country wide. While all elements are not yet fully implemented in all health boards, the key principles which guide a good assessment should be firmly established at this stage.

All social workers are working from a standard set of resource materials and all prospective adopters will receive a standard workbook to help you to reflect on the issues which arise in the intercountry adoption process outside of formal sessions or interviews. This workbook also elaborates in greater detail the capacities being assessed by you and the social worker throughout the process.

There are target time frames for each stage of the assessment. Each assessment is different, as every applicant is, however, all boards are working towards progressing each stage within the suggested time-frame.

2. The Intercountry Adoption Assessment Process

2.1 What is an assessment?

Assessment is generally defined as a two-way process whereby you and the agency share information and decide together if adopting a child will work for all the parties concerned, especially the potential child.

2.2 Who carries out assessments?

In accordance with Section 8 (1) of the Adoption Act, 1991 a health board must carry out assessments for persons ordinarily resident in its functional area. Registered adoption societies may carry out assessments on behalf of health boards or at the request of those wishing to adopt abroad but are not obliged to do so.

2.3 Why the assessment?

The need for your assessment stems from the requirement in the Adoption Act, 1952, as referred to in the Adoption Act, 1991, that the Adoption Board has the responsibility for determining suitability and eligibility to adopt from abroad. It is the requirement to establish suitability of applicants which has led to the development of assessment.

It is very important to be aware that the role of the State is to ensure the child's right to a good family. As prospective adoptive parents, you and your family face a major challenge, and the State needs to ensure that you have the necessary preparation and the capability to meet the long-term challenges of adopting a child from abroad. Each child has the right to be cared for by carers who have the appropriate skills, training and support.

2.4 The model of assessment

The model of assessment in the standardised framework for intercountry adoption is based on the theory that individuals do not function in isolation but rather as part of highly organised systems. The adoptive family as a whole serves as the context for any placement. As every member of a household will both affect and be affected by the presence of an adopted child it is important to understand the family relationships and possible points of strain and tension.

The use of this approach in assessment includes reflecting on material from your own life experience and how this has influenced you as an adult. However, the focus is more firmly on the present and future than on the past. By identifying the family network and systems which make up the day to day lives of potential carers, you as applicants, together with your social worker are enabled to explore behaviours and relationships, the routines and rituals, the family rules and boundaries, the support networks and stresses with a view to reaching a decision on your suitability to adopt.

2.5 Self-selection

- **Your role in the self-selection model**

The self-selection model is intended to give greater balance in the relationship between you and the social worker. This relationship

should be characterised by openness, honesty and trust during the assessment. While it is the social worker's responsibility to prepare the final assessment report and make a recommendation, the approach in the self-selection model is based on self-determination, and you should play a major role in evaluating your own family's suitability to adopt a child from abroad, in the decision making process.

- **The role of your social worker**

The role of your social worker is to carry out the assessment on behalf of the agency. Their role can involve several perspectives, including being the child's representative. They are responsible for preparing you; enabling you to educate yourself; and helping you to explore relevant issues with a view to reaching a decision on your suitability to adopt.

2.6 The Partners in the Adoption Process

The role of the partners in the adoption process is described in the "Information Booklet on Intercountry Adoption", booklet no. 1, in this series:

- Prospective Parents
- The Adoption Board
- The Health Board
- The Social Worker
- Voluntary Groups/Parent Representative Groups

3. Stages in the Adoption Assessment Process

3.1 An Outline of the 5 Stages

Initial Enquiry: You make contact with the health board or registered adoption society. You receive booklets like this one on the adoption process. In some boards you may be invited to attend an information meeting.

Application: You complete your form and forward it to the local health board or agency and a preliminary assessment is carried out. This covers issues such as age, health, garda clearance, financial circumstances and references.

**Education/
Preparation:** This consists of structured group sessions organised by the health board. These sessions are an essential stage in the process as they provide an opportunity for you to explore in greater detail the issues surrounding intercountry adoption and to assess your skills and resources as potential parents. To help you in this process of reflection a workbook for applicants has been developed which you begin to use at this stage but which you keep throughout the process to remind you of and allow you to revisit key issues. *The course is a prerequisite for moving on to the next stage.*

**Home Study/
Assessment:** You will be assigned a social worker who will carry out a series of interviews. At least one of these will be in your home. This is an opportunity for you to explore a range of issues with the social worker in a supportive environment. As already outlined, this stage of the process is aimed at helping you to assess how behaviours and relationships, routines and rituals, family rules and boundaries, support networks and stresses will affect your family and an adoptive child. A final report will be prepared by the social worker. This report will be shared with you before any decision is made concerning the social worker's recommendation.

Decision: Your assessing agency's placement committee will consider the social worker's report and make a recommendation to the Adoption Board. The Adoption Board will decide whether to issue a declaration of eligibility and suitability on this basis.

3.2 Initial Stage (Stage 1)

Your initial enquiry

When you contact the health board or agency you will be sent an information pack which will help you to start the process of self-reflection, to include the following:

- A booklet “Information Booklet on the Intercountry Adoption Process for Prospective Adoptive Parents”. This booklet outlines the adoption process and contains details of the many useful contact addresses and telephone numbers for further information;
- A booklet/leaflet prepared by the individual agency, outlining its own particular policy and procedures for dealing with applications (this will include reference to complaints procedures);
- This booklet on understanding the assessment process; and
- Other information.
Because many enquirers about foreign adoption may not be aware of the other options of family building, such as fostering children in alternative care in Ireland, you may also be sent an information booklet on fostering.

Some health boards or agencies invite those interested in adopting to an information evening to distribute this documentation using it as an opportunity for adopters to meet with other interested adopters as well as a member of the intercountry adoption team.

Some health boards or agencies will also issue an application pack when issuing the information pack, others will issue it after you have received the information pack, if you indicate that you wish to proceed with an application.

The application pack includes:

- An application form;
- The health board or agency’s representation and complaints procedure.

3.3 Application/Preliminary Assessment Stage (Stage 2)

When you have had the opportunity to reflect on the information provided to you at the initial stage, you will be in a position to make an informed choice on whether intercountry adoption is an option you wish to take further.

3.3.1 Making the Application

1. The application form is issued with an explanatory letter and specifies the documentation which you will be required to obtain and submit, such as certificates, (birth, marriage, divorce etc.), authorisation for Garda report, references, financial information and health status report.
2. When your completed application (including required information) has been received by the health board or agency you will receive an acknowledgement, including an outline of how the application will be processed (you may already have received this at enquiry stage).

3.3.2 The Preliminary Assessment

On receipt of your application the health board or agency will

1. Check that it contains the required documentation.
2. Subject your application to a preliminary assessment against the criteria outlined below.

The following criteria will be considered in the Preliminary Assessment

- **Age**

Age is a significant factor in parenting a child to adulthood and may be taken into account at this stage. The “Information Booklet on Intercountry Adoption” outlines the age-limits for intercountry adopters. You should note that some overseas countries may also stipulate both upper or lower age limits for prospective adopters.

- **Garda Records**

You will be required to give your authorisation to the health board or agency to obtain a Garda report. The report seeks a statement from the Garda Commissioner that there are no convictions recorded against you or your spouse (if you are adopting jointly) or a statement of any convictions

recorded against you, as the case may be. The statement explicitly excludes expressions of opinion regarding your character(s) or references to unsuccessful prosecutions. You should note that most countries will not accept applicants with a criminal record.

- **Health Status**

The purpose of the check on health status is to ensure there is a reasonable expectation that you will continue to enjoy good health and be able to fulfill your duties to the child over its period of growing up.

The medical report is to be completed by a doctor (usually your own G.P.) and seeks details of your family history, your own medical history, your daily consumption of cigarettes/tobacco, alcohol or habit forming drugs, a medical examination taken at the time, marital history, mental health and the opinion of the doctor on your ability to care adequately for a child until the age of independence.

Your medical report will be assessed by a medical adviser of the board/agency. In addition, you should note that the Adoption Board will be issuing guidance for doctors preparing reports and health board medical advisers. This guidance will be drawn up by a representative group of medical advisers with a knowledge of intercountry adoption issues. This is to ensure that assessment in relation to health status is consistent across the country.

- **Financial Circumstances**

Section 13 of the Adoption Act, 1952 requires that the assessing agency establish that the applicant has sufficient means to support the child. You will be asked to provide:

- a statement of employment (giving position, period in post, status & income);
- recent P60s to support the above data;
- details of regular household outgoings;
- details of savings, assets and liabilities.

Financial circumstances cannot be described solely in terms of income or capital assets. People with small incomes can have more stable, more orderly finances

than people in higher income brackets. The social worker is only concerned with establishing that the family's finances are in good order and can fulfill requirements of the Adoption Act, 1952.

- **Your Referees**

You will be asked to provide personal references from two persons who are not related to you e.g. a good friend or neighbour who knows you well (not from specific categories of persons). At least one referee will be interviewed. You should only nominate a referee that you feel knows you well enough to give a fair and accurate reference. While adopting parents are not expected to be “perfect” parents, your referees will be asked questions around whether they consider you have the abilities and resources to enable you to cope and to provide a child with a safe nurturing environment.

3.3.3 The possible outcomes to the preliminary stage

There are three possible outcomes to the preliminary assessment and you will be informed accordingly:

- a. There may be **inadequate information** provided and you will be invited to provide the specified material to make your application valid.
- b. If the preliminary assessment has a **positive outcome**, you will proceed to the next stage. You will be informed of this by letter, which will include information on when you can expect to be called for the next stage, the preparation course, and when the social worker will meet you to commence assessment stage.
- c. In a very small number of cases it will be clear from this preliminary assessment of the application, that you will not be recommended for approval by reference to some or all of the criteria outlined above. In this case, the more detailed preparation/educational and home study stages of the assessment will not be required. You will be informed of the proposed decision, the reasons for this decision and that you may appeal the decision through the specified appeal mechanisms. At this point
 - i. you may withdraw your application;
 - ii. you may appeal the negative decision;

- iii. the agency will move the application to the decision-making stage of the assessment.

Target time frame for the application/preliminary assessment stage: Providing all required information has been provided with the completed application form, the preliminary assessment should take around 1 month.

3.4 Education / Preparation Stage (Stage 3)

A preparation course will be provided for all applicants who have been approved at preliminary assessment, and is a prerequisite to commencing the assessment stage.

3.4.1 Why education/preparation?

The preparation course is designed for you to acquire knowledge, skills and the opportunity for reflection in relation to your plans to adopt from abroad. It is generally recognised that there is a period of adjustment required in preparation for parenthood. For biological parents there is a normal nine month adjustment, and then development as the child grows from infant to toddler. In intercountry adoption you can move straight into the toddler stage.

In the new standardised framework this stage has been identified as one of the most important stages for prospective adopters. The new education/preparation course is intended to bring adopters to the home study stage with a greater understanding of the issues involved in intercountry adoption. This should assist in moving more quickly through the home study stage in highly focused interviews which recognise the state of readiness you have already achieved.

Preparation is an essential part of the overall assessment process in the standardised framework for the following reasons.

1. It is designed to help you make a fully-informed choice of whether or not to adopt a child including enabling you to become aware of the full impact of adoptive parenthood;
2. It is designed to introduce you to the issues involved in adoption; to give you an opportunity to discuss and reflect on them; and to provide an opportunity to explore how these issues may impact on your decision to adopt a child.

3. It will give you an opportunity to meet other prospective adopters and persons who have adopted. Meeting these people can help you to develop invaluable networks of support which you can draw on after you have adopted.

3.4.2 How will the preparation course be run?

1. The course will be participative, based on the principles of adult education. Where possible experienced adopters, birth parents and adoptees will be participating in the delivery of preparation programmes.
2. In general, there will be six to eight sets of applicants at the preparation courses and the course will comprise six to eight sessions giving eighteen to twenty-four hours of preparation (although the courses may be organised differently in the health boards so you will need to check with your health board for the specific arrangements).
3. The course materials have been developed at national level and all social workers are working from a standard set of resource materials. In addition, you will be provided with a workbook which contains essays and exercises which will help you to reflect on issues between sessions and perhaps highlight issues which you need more time in resolving or that you would like to return to at the home study stage.
4. At the end of the preparation stage, you will be given the task of, and guidelines on, preparing written accounts of your own life stories, especially in respect of connections to the adoptive role. This will be an integral part of the home study stage and for the completion of the final report.

In some health board areas the preparation courses may be organised on a cross health board basis. The preparation course will cover the following issues:

- The Importance of Attachment
- The Adoption Family Tree
- The Impact of Loss and Separation
- Identity, Difference and Belonging
- Child Development and Medical Matters

- Talking About Adoption – Telling the Adoption Story
- The Adoption Life Cycle

Target time frame for the education/preparation stage: The preparation programmes should generally be held over a 4 month period.

3.5 Home Study Stage (Stage 4)

As stated earlier the approach to your assessment for Intercountry Adoption will be grounded firmly in the self-selection model, while accepting that the State has the ultimate role in deciding if you have the capacity to parent an adopted child. This approach to your assessment will help you and your social worker to deal with intrusive issues. However, you should keep the following points in mind:

- There are valid issues of a sensitive nature which need be explored, in terms of parenting somebody else's child.
- There is a need to know about the stability of your relationship, sexuality, or about infertility, if this is an issue;

A therapy role is not part of the Social Worker's role in conducting the intercountry adoption assessment. If issues arise in this or any other stage of the process which, in the social worker's and agency's view, needs resolution, you will be advised to suspend the process while any issues are resolved. You will be facilitated in every way possible, and the assessment will recommence at your request.

3.5.1 The arrangements for the interviews in practice/Who will be interviewed?

- In the standardised framework approach the members of the family are viewed as a system which will mean that separate couple and individual interviews may not be necessarily required. It may be that separate interviews will still be carried out if you wish or if it is the view of your social worker that your individual application warrants it.
- Everyone living in the family unit will be involved in the decision to adopt a child from abroad, especially existing children in the family. Your social worker will discuss with you the topics they propose to discuss with the children and account will be taken of age, developmental stage and

special needs (if relevant) of the children, when making this arrangement. The social worker will ensure that the children's needs are safeguarded, especially if talk of adoption raises their expectations/ hopes prematurely.

3.5.2 How will the interviews be scheduled?

Your home study/assessment interviews will be undertaken as a regular scheduled process. Specific topics or issues will be discussed at each meeting. The intended areas for discussion will be outlined by the social worker and you will be told what is intended before each session. In general the interviews will last for an hour and a half to two hours. The interview process should generally be finalised within six to seven interviews with nine to ten hours of contact in normal circumstances.

The venue for the interviews will be a balance between the home and the office. At least one interview will be held in your home so that an assessment of the surroundings for the child can be made. The remainder may be held in the agency's office.

3.5.3 Interruptions to the home study

An issue may emerge during the home study which indicates that there will be a negative recommendation, or that some action is needed by you before the process may continue.

Where a major issue emerges early in this stage which leads the social worker to conclude that a negative recommendation will be made, the social worker will work this through with you. It may be possible to resolve some issues at this stage. If not the following options arise:–

- you may decide to withdraw the application;
- You may decide not to withdraw your application, in this case the social worker will prepare a report, without having explored the full range of issues, detailing the conclusion and the basis for this, and submit it through the normal decision-making process.
- Where an issue emerges, such as infertility, and where it appears that you are not in a position to proceed at the time, this will be discussed, and you will be able to suspend the process until you are ready to proceed.

3.5.4 What are the main areas to be covered during the home study stage?

The legal standard you have to meet in order for a declaration of suitability and eligibility for intercountry adoption to be made are set out in law. The standards set out below are intended to be used by all parties to the process as indicative of good practice within this legal framework.

1. Your capacity to safeguard your child throughout his or her childhood.
2. Your capacity to provide the child with family life that will promote his or her development and well being and pay due regard to the physical, emotional, social, health, educational, cultural, spiritual and other dimensions. The resources that families can draw on will vary from family to family and may change over time. Whatever circumstances your family find yourselves in, you will be able to demonstrate your understanding of the importance of maintaining an on-going and meaningful relationship with your child.
3. Your capacity to provide an environment where the child's original nationality, race, culture, language and religion will be valued and appropriately promoted throughout childhood. This will include your capacity to recognise the differences between yourselves and your child within these areas and to recognise and try to combat racism and other institutional and personal oppressive forces within society.
4. Your capacity to recognise and understand the impact being an adopted child from an overseas country has on the development of your child's identity throughout their childhood and beyond.
5. Your capacity to recognise the need for and to arrange for appropriate support and intervention from health, social services, educational and other services throughout childhood.

Many of these topics will be explored in a general way during the preparation/education stage of the process. During the interview / home study stage the social worker will further explore your capacities by considering key indicators of the presence of these capacities. The topics for the home study stage will emerge from (i) documentation prepared during the Education/Preparation course; (ii) those topics you have identified as requiring further discussion; and

(iii) topics the social worker assesses as relevant to understanding your capacity to parent an intercountry adoptee. The discussion might include, for example,;–

- (i) What you have learned from the Education/Preparation course;
- (ii) The physical safety of the home and the financial security you can provide;
- (iii) Your physical and mental health;
- (iv) Your emotional resources:–
 - ways of dealing with stress, anger and conflict;
 - your personal resilience;
 - your capacity for commitment and responsibility in personal relationships,
 - your experience of loss;
 - your family, friendship and community support network.
- (v) Your experience and knowledge of parenting and being parented;
- (vi) Your knowledge and understanding of the health and medical needs of a child;
- (vii) Your expectations for the child;
- (viii) Your practical plans for the child;
- (ix) Your flexibility in accepting and celebrating difference;
- (x) Your understanding of issues of identity, culture and language needs of an adoptive child and your capacity to cope with and support these needs as and when they arise;
- (xi) Your understanding and commitment to support the child's need to understand their past;
- (xii) Your understanding and commitment to recognise the social, medical and educational needs of the child and arrange for appropriate interventions.

In the course of the discussions your personal circumstances; marriage stability; motivation for adoption; experience of infertility (if relevant); personal background; personality and interests are issues which are likely to arise. The social worker may discuss the sexual aspect of your relationship and of previous relationships as an indicator of the stability of the relationship. However, the topic of sexuality is not to be confused with the details of sex, and specific details about sexual behaviour or past relationships are not required to assess your suitability.

Target time frame for the home study stage : The process should be completed within a twelve to fourteen week time band. Where, as happens, it is necessary to deviate from the above target, or to suspend the process your social worker will discuss this with you.

3.6 Report / Decision Making Stage (Stage 5)

3.6.1 Purpose of the Report

The main purpose of the report is to serve as a basis for the decision to approve you as adoptive parents, to be made by the health board or agency in the first instance, and by the Adoption Board. The assessment report must also be capable of being used to present your family to the representatives of the child in the donor country after the declaration has been granted to you to help the authorities make a decision on matching and placing a child with your family.

A standardised format will be used for the final report. This will include the following details (this is not exhaustive):

- Names and Address
- Dates of Birth, Marriage
- Nationality
- Religion
- Occupation and Income
- Details of Previous Marriages (if any)
- Details of other Adults/children in the Household

- Whether you have Adopted Before
- If you are adopting a Particular Child, details of that child
- Details of your Physical Appearance
- A Checklist of Documents (those provided at the preliminary stage +photographs)
- Passport details
- Individual Profiles
- Marital Relationship including details of childlessness and infertility if relevant
- Motivation for Adoption
- Assessment of Capacity with Reference to the Five Standards
- Home Situation
- Childcare Arrangements
- Interviews with Referees or Guardians (pre-declared Guardians are required by some sending countries)

Target time frame for the report stage : The final report should be compiled within four weeks of the completion of the assessment.

3.6.2 Sharing the contents of the report with you

The Report ends with a recommendation from the assessing social worker regarding your parenting capacity on this occasion.

- When the report has been completed by the social worker you will be given a full opportunity to review the contents of the report, and to raise issues with which you do not agree. The self-selection approach throughout the process should ensure that there are no surprise conclusions at this stage.
- If there are issues on which you do not agree with the social worker's assessment, these will be considered by your social worker, and if agreed the report should be amended.

- If there is not agreement, after mediation by the agency supervisor, you will be afforded an opportunity to provide written comment on the matters in dispute and this should be submitted with the report to the placement committee for consideration.

3.6.3 Decision-Making

The Adoption Board will make its decision on suitability and eligibility for adoption following completion of assessment and will base this decision on the recommendation of the health board or agency placement committee and your social worker's report.

The layers in the decision making process are as follows:

1. Your Social Worker supervised by a Senior Social Worker
2. The Placement Committee
3. The Adoption Board

Disputes, Complaints, and Appeals

At all stages of the process you will be entitled to have your views considered, and if you are unhappy with the recommendation or decision, you will have the right to appeal that recommendation/decision to the next level of authority.

- **At health board or agency level**

Each health board or agency will have its own complaints and appeals structure in place. In general the structure will be as follows:

1. If you are unhappy with an aspect of the social workers report and recommendation, and on discussing this with the social worker and the supervisor, you are unable to come to a mutual agreement, it would be open to you to make a written submission of your own for consideration by the placement committee at the same time as the social worker's report.
2. The social worker will have an opportunity to examine any submission, and make any further written comment.

3. When a decision has been made you will be informed in writing of both the decision, and the basis on which it is made, and of the relevant appeal mechanism.

- **At Adoption Board level**

1. You will be afforded an opportunity to view and make comment on the report and recommendation which is being sent forward to the Adoption Board from the agency, and which will be used by the Adoption Board as the basis for decision-making.
2. If you choose to make a written submission, the Adoption Board will pass this to the agency for comment, and after receiving any written comment, proceed with the decision.
3. The Adoption Board will offer you and your social worker a hearing on the application.
4. After hearing both parties the Adoption Board will make its decision and inform both parties in writing of the decision, and the basis on which it is made.

The Adoption Board is an independent statutory body and it is open to you to seek judicial review of any decision of the Board.