ADOPTION BOARD

“GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS – A STANDARDISED FRAMEWORK FOR DOMESTIC ADOPTION PREPARATION, ASSESSMENT AND DECISION-MAKING PROCEDURES”

FINAL VERSION

Dr Valerie O’Brien and Dr Eileen Conway,
Dept of Social Policy and Social Work,
University College Dublin.

19th November 2004
Contents

PART I  INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS
1.1  Background to the Guide
1.2  Structure and Contents
1.3  Purpose of the Guide
1.4  Key Aspects underpinning Adoption
1.5  The Language of Domestic Adoption

PART II – THE IRISH CONTEXT
2.1  Introduction to Irish Domestic Adoption
  2.1.1  The Five Strands of Domestic Adoption
    2.1.1.1  Stranger Adoption
    2.1.1.2  Step-Parent (Family) Adoption
    2.1.1.3  Relative Adoption
    2.1.1.4  Adoptions out of long-term Foster Care
    2.1.1.5  Adoption under Irish Law of Certain Children adopted Abroad
  2.1.2  Processing of Domestic Adoption Applications
  2.1.3  Report of the Domestic Adoption Sub-Group
  2.1.4  Trends in Domestic Adoption
2.2  Principles and Practice in Domestic Adoption Assessment
  2.2.1  Introduction
  2.2.2  Issues arising from Current Adoption Procedures
2.3  The Irish Context
  2.3.1  Introduction
  2.3.2  Legislative Framework
  2.3.3  Organisational Issues
    2.3.3.1  High Level Issues
    2.3.3.2  Service Demand Levels
    2.3.3.3  Staffing the Service into the Future
    2.3.3.4  Financial Planning for Adoption Services
    2.3.3.5  Service Management
  2.3.4  Professional Practice
  2.3.5  Significant Issues in Domestic Adoption Assessment Practice
    2.3.5.1  The Position of Birth Parents
    2.3.5.2  Open Adoption
    2.3.5.3  Step-Parent Adoption
    2.3.5.4  Delays in Placements
    2.3.5.5  The Decision to Proceed with Adoption

PART III – DEVELOPMENT OF THE STANDARDISED FRAMEWORK FOR DOMESTIC ADOPTION ASSESSMENT
3.1  Key Issues from the Literature
3.2  Conceptualisation of the Standardised Framework
  3.2.1  A Systemic Approach to Adoption
  3.2.2  Existing Practice
3.3  The Five Standards for Adoption
3.4  The Standardised Framework for Domestic Adoption Assessment
3.5  Defining the Process Framework
3.6  Standards incorporated into the Model

19th November 2004  Dept of Social Policy and Social Work, UCD
3.7 Application of the Standardised Framework
   3.7.1 Introduction
   3.7.2 Making it Happen

PART IV – THE GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS – INITIAL STAGES
4.1 The Initial Enquiry Stage
   4.1.1 Handling the Enquiry
   4.1.2 The Information Pack
4.2 Making the Application
4.3 The Application and the Initial Assessment
   4.3.1 The Preliminary Assessment
   4.3.2 Eligibility within the Five Strands of Domestic Adoption
   4.3.3 Input from External Sources
   4.3.4 Criteria for Suitability to Adopt
4.4 Adoption for Children – The “Best Interests” Question
   4.4.1 Is Adoption Appropriate?
   4.4.2 Care Planning
   4.4.3 Roles of Social Worker allocated to work with the Child
   4.4.4 Working with Children in Adoption
4.5 Outcome of Child’s ‘Best Interest’ Question and Preliminary Assessment
   4.5.1 The possibilities in decision-making
   4.5.2 Appealing Initial Assessment Decisions
4.6 Birth Parents in Adoption
   4.6.1 Introduction
   4.6.2 Separation of Tasks
   4.6.3 Services for birth parents and birth families
   4.6.4 Working with Birth Parents
   4.6.5 Support Services

PART V – THE GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS – THE PREPARATION STAGE
5.1 Introduction
5.2 Arrangements for Providing Preparation Courses
5.3 The Preparation Course Workbook
5.4 Structure of Preparation Courses
5.5 Finishing the Preparation Process
5.6 General Content of Preparation Courses
5.7 Specific Content for the Five Strands of Domestic Adoption
   5.7.1 Step-Parent Adoptions
   5.7.2 Relative (Family) Adoptions
   5.7.3 Foster Parent Adoptions
   5.7.4 Adoption under Irish Law of Children Adopted Abroad
   5.7.5 Stranger Adoption
5.8 Step-Parent Adoptions – Delivery of Preparation Courses
   5.8.1 Step-Parent Adoption – Session 1
   5.8.2 Step-Parent Adoption – Session 2
5.9 Family Adoption – Delivery of Preparation Courses
   5.9.1 Family Adoption – Session 1
   5.9.2 Family Adoption – Session 2
   5.9.3 Family Adoption – Session 3
5.10 Foster Parent Adoptions – Delivery of Preparation Courses
   5.10.1 Foster Parent Adoptions – Session 1
   5.10.2 Foster Parent Adoptions – Session 2
   5.10.3 Foster Parent Adoptions – Session 3
5.11 Stranger Adoptions – Delivery of Preparation Courses
   5.11.1 Stranger Adoptions – Session 1
   5.11.2 Stranger Adoptions – Session 2
   5.11.3 Stranger Adoptions – Session 3
   5.11.4 Stranger Adoptions – Session 4 & 5

PART VI – THE GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS – THE ASSESSMENT/HOME STUDY
6.1 Introduction
6.2 General Principles
6.3 Structure of the Assessment Process
6.4 Topics to be covered in the Assessment Process
   6.4.1 Marriage Stability
   6.4.2 Motivation to Adopt
   6.4.3 Parenting Capacity
   6.4.4 Family Reaction to the Proposed Adoption
   6.4.5 Expectations of the Child for Adoption
   6.4.6 Telling about Adoption
   6.4.7 Open Adoption
   6.4.8 Reclaim of Child by the Birth Mother
   6.4.9 Infertility
6.5 Proposed Interview Schedule where there is No Pre-Existing Relationship
   6.5.1 First Interview with Applicants
   6.5.2 Second and Third Interviews
   6.5.3 Fourth Interview
   6.5.4 Fifth Interview
   6.5.5 Sixth Interview
   6.5.6 Additional Interviews
   6.5.7 Working with applicants towards a recommendation
6.6 Proposed Interview Schedule where there is A Pre-Existing Relationship
   6.6.1 First Interview with Applicants
   6.6.2 Second Interview
   6.6.3 Third and Fourth Interviews
   6.6.4 Fifth Interview
   6.6.5 Sixth Interview
   6.6.6 Seventh Interview
   6.6.7 Additional Interviews

PART VII MATCHING AND CONTACT IN DOMESTIC ADOPTION
7.1 Matching Children with Adoptive Parents
7.2 Principles for Matching
7.3 Issues to Consider in Matching Decisions
7.4 Planning and Managing Contact

PART VIII THE FINAL STAGES
8.1 The Report
8.1.1 Purpose of the Assessment Report
8.1.2 Format of the Report
8.1.3 Information Analysis leading to Professional Judgement
8.1.4 Compiling the Final Report
8.1.5 Headings for the Final Report
8.1.6 Sharing the Contents with Applicants

8.2 Decision-Making
8.2.1 Introduction
8.2.2 Adoption Committees
8.2.3 Composition and Operation of Adoption Committees
8.2.4 Managing the Adoption Committee

8.3 Records and File-Keeping
8.4 Procedures for Complaints and Representations

8.5 Supervision and Quality Assurance
8.5.1 Introduction
8.5.2 The Role of the Supervisor
8.5.3 Role of the Adoption Board/ Authority
PART I INTRODUCTION TO THE “GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS”

1.1 Background to Guide

Adoption as we know it today was introduced in Ireland with the Adoption Act, 1952. Approximately 40,000 children have been formally adopted since then. One of the factors which has changed adoption over that period has been the steady decline in the number of children available for adoption domestically, as birth parents have better supports to help them rear their own children. Domestic adoptions made under the 1952 Act reached a peak in 1967 when 1,493 orders were granted. 293 such orders were made in 2001. There has been an increase in inter-country adoption since the Adoption Act, 1990.

As a result of the increasing number of inter-country adoptions, in 1999 the Department of Health commissioned a report on the subject, which resulted in the development of a standardised framework for inter-country adoption assessment procedures (O’Brien and Richardson, 1999). The implementation of the standardised framework was furthered in 2000 when a Guide for Practitioners on the Standardised Framework was published (Dept of Health & Children, 2000). This has facilitated the objective of standardisation of training, preparation and assessment for applicants for inter-country adoption throughout the country.

A Domestic Adoption Sub-Group was established following a management review of the Adoption Board in March 2002. The Sub-Group’s initial emphasis was on reviewing the current adoption processes so as to achieve a standardised, effective and efficient service throughout the state. The Sub-Groups recommendations are discussed in Section 2.1.3, and given in full in Appendix 2 of this document. The Sub-Group have sought to make the domestic adoption process consistent with the inter-country adoption process where possible. The Sub-Group have recommended an integrated domestic service in which the Health Boards or registered Adoption Agencies carry out all domestic adoption assessments. Responsibility for all domestic adoption assessments is to transfer to the health boards/ adoption agencies. The development of a Domestic Adoption Preparation and Assessment Framework is the first step in this process. The Adoption Board intends also to develop practice standards in relation to birth parents, decision-making, and post-adoption service delivery.

This “Guide for Practitioners” Document has been commissioned by the Adoption Board, and prepared by the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, UCD. The Implementation Committee on Domestic Adoption has overseen the preparation of the Guide on behalf of the Adoption Board.

The process of development has included consultation with existing adoption practitioners and users of services, in the belief that the development of successful, new practice models needs to include the input of the practitioners and users. This involved a number of meetings with practitioners. A random sample of adoptive parents who were granted an adoption order in 2003 was contacted to establish their views on the service. The vast majority of the responses reported a very positive
social work service and a high degree of satisfaction with the service received. A wide range of agencies and groups were requested for input also. Involvement in its development is also an important step in developing and empowering those who will be charged with taking forward the implementation of the Standardised Framework for Domestic Adoption Assessment, and bringing about the changes which the Domestic Adoption Sub-Group have recommended.

The intended users of the Guide are the workers who are to be involved in domestic adoption assessment in the health boards and adoption agencies. It is intended primarily for new workers in this field and the Guide will form the basis of training and development for this group. The Guide is also intended to inform decision-makers in adoption work.

1.2 Structure and Contents

This Guide is structured into eight Parts where relevant subjects are identified, related and structured to give a logical, coherent and self-contained document. Parts I to III set out the background to the Guide, and give an overview of the Standardised Framework. Parts IV to VIII set out the detailed use of the Framework for practitioners. The document is structured in line with the five stages of the model – the initial/information stage, application stage, preparation stage, home study/assessment and decision-making stages. Each strand of domestic adoption is considered within this structure as set out in Parts IV to VIII. This approach captures the differences within each strand, while holding onto the centrality of key issues throughout.

The Guide is produced in a loose-leaf A4 format to facilitate its use as a manual for practitioners.

**Part I** is the introduction to the guide, setting out the background to its preparation, its structure and summarising key aspects underpinning adoption.

**Part II** describes the context of Irish Domestic Adoption as a background to the Standardised Framework and the Guide for Practitioners. It looks at the principles implicit in current practice, as well as reviewing legislation, organisational and professional practice issues.

**Part III** develops the Standardised Framework for Domestic Adoption. It looks at key issues in the literature, explores key factors, conceptualises and defines the Framework.

**Part IV** is the first part of the Guide for Practitioners, advising on the application of the first stages involved in the Standardised Domestic Adoption Framework. This Part considers the relationship of the framework with the ‘best interests of children’ question, and considers briefly the corresponding services and standards for working with birth parents, which should occur in parallel with the adopter preparation and assessment process.

Part VI of the Guide deals with the Assessment/Home Study aspect of the Framework

Part VII of the Guide deals with the matching and contact aspects of the domestic adoption process

Part VIII includes the final stages of the Framework, including the report-writing, decision-making, supervision and quality assurance.

The Document also contains a number of Appendices, with material included to make a single reference document to assist practitioners.

1.3 Purpose of the Guide

The purpose of the Guide and the Proposed Framework is

- to enable agencies and their workers to perform their key functions to an appropriate, explicit and consistent standard;
- to make explicit and transparent the process and the areas which potential adopters will be expected to engage in with the agency;
- to establish the range of checks which workers would be expected to undertake in respect of prospective adopters;
- to establish the decision-making process. Decision-making should encompass:
  - if adoption is in the best interests of a particular child?
  - if the applicants should be approved to adopt?
  - is the match between the child and the family suitable?

The Guidance is written primarily for those who will put the framework into practice, the practitioner, and assumes a level of knowledge and competence in adoption theory.

1.4 Key Aspects underpinning Adoption

A number of key aspects underpinning adoption have been identified over the course of the development of the document. This Framework draws and builds on identified good practice and recognises the high standard of professional social work in adoption in Ireland:

- Childrens’ needs should continue to be at the centre of decision-making, together with a long-term perspective on the impact of adoption;
- Adoption should safeguard children, which implies a rigorous, quality-oriented process;
- There is no statutory right to an assessment for domestic adoption and agencies should retain the facility to recruit adoptive parents as and when they need them to meet the needs of children;
- Adopters should see the process as fair and transparent, and expect respect and sensitivity;
- The proper approach is partnership of preparation and assessment for demanding role as adoptive parents;
- Social work service to birth parents is an intrinsic element of an adoption service. While not the primary focus of this guide, an introduction to such services is included in Section 4.5

1.5 The Language of Domestic Adoption

It is necessary when considering adoption and adoption-related matters to work towards an agreed vocabulary. For the purposes of these guidelines we have used the following terms with the meanings discussed below. We have endeavoured to reflect the wishes of members of particular interest groups consulted in setting out the language of this document, but this has not always been possible. Our choices, we believe, reflects the up-to-date and internationally accepted application of language in this field.

“Adoption” is process by which a child becomes a member of a new family. Adoption creates a permanent legal relationship between a child and the adoptive parents, in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption Acts, 1952 to 1998.

“Birth Parents” is the term used throughout for the biological parents of the child.

“Stranger Adoption” is the term applied to one of the strands of domestic adoption. Other labels suggested and considered for this particular strand included “baby” adoption, which may have been applicable in the past, but as this cohort changes we believe this term would be inappropriate. Similarly the term “unrelated” or “non-relative” implies that the other strands are “related” which is not the case. Although recognised as not being an ideal label, because the parties to the adoption do not remain as strangers, “stranger adoption” is used nonetheless in this document.

“Open Adoption” means the birth parent or birth parents retain a degree of contact with the child (usually one or two visits a year) after the adoption order is made. Semi-open adoption is a term used to describe a level of contact which includes exchange of letters, birthday presents and photos arranged through the adoption agency.

A willingness to provide linkages to the child’s birth family, when appropriate, is now considered pivotal to the success of the adoption placement. In the past, the opposite was thought to be true, adoption represented a complete severance of all ties with the child’s birth family in the interests of creating a “normal” family. More often than not the interests of the adopting parents were served over the adopted child. Currently it is considered ideal that the adoptive family share as well as promote the child’s background and heritage (BAAF, 1998) and where possible maintain regular contact with the birth parent(s).

It has been noted that an increasing number of domestic non-family adoptions are ‘open adoptions’. At present, however, there is no provision in Irish law for such open adoption arrangements, and such post-adoption contact is by means of a voluntary agreement between birth and adoptive parents; at present all parental rights are transferred to the adoptive parents on the making of the adoption order.
It is also recognised that some birth mothers may choose not to remain in contact once the final adoption consent has been completed.

**Eligibility (to Adopt)**

Applicants must meet the eligibility criteria set out in law (see Section 5.3.2) which describes those persons who may adopt. If applicants do not come within the classes of persons deemed eligible to adopt, an application to adopt cannot be considered valid and cannot proceed. Table 5.1 sets out the categories of persons deemed eligible to adopt within the five strands of Domestic Adoption.

Persons who satisfy the legal eligibility criteria may be subject also to the adoption agencies own criteria that they use to admit applicants to their waiting lists.

**Suitability (to Adopt)**

The 1952 legislation governing adoption requires the applicants’ “suitability” for adoption to be assessed and approved before a declaration of suitability is given. However, the Act does not set out specific criteria for the assessment of suitability. In the interests of transparency, agencies generally specify certain suitability criteria in their policy documents, and against which they assess applicants. To assist with equity and consistency of application in Domestic Adoption, suitability criteria are recommended in Table 5.2 of this Guide. These reflect the established “good practice” arising from the child-centred nature of adoption and are linked to the Five Standards of Adoption discussed in Section 5.1.2.

“**Preparation**” is the stage in which applicants, in recognition of the needs of the children who are at the centre of an adoption process familiarise themselves with what is involved, reflect on what it is makes them potentially good in handling the issues that arise from adoption, and make themselves aware of the challenges and pitfalls that they may encounter. The Preparation Stage is intended to do this in a relevant, informative and self-reflective way.

“**Assessment/ Home Study**” The assessment process is commonly called a “home study”. The general aims of assessment are to address the needs of children by identifying potentially good quality, safe homes. The applicants and social worker are expected to work in partnership through a full, honest and open assessment of key issues in a series of interviews. Applicants are helped to recognise their own needs, strengths and limitations and it is hoped that through the assessment process the applicant will come to evaluate his/ her existing understanding and skills as well as the potential for learning and development over time (BAAF, 1998). Current practice favours an empowering approach. The home study culminates in the preparation of a report by the social worker to evaluate potential, to facilitate decision-making, and to recommend a placement type.

“**Adoption Agency**”: The term adoption agency in this document is taken to refer to both the registered adoption societies and the health boards involved, or proposed to be involved, in the domestic adoption field.
PART II – THE IRISH CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction to Irish Domestic Adoption

2.1.1 The Five Strands of Domestic Adoption
There are five strands (or sources) of domestic adoption applications in Ireland. These applications arise from different scenarios, and are known as:

- Stranger Adoption
- Step-Parent (Family) Adoption
- Relative Adoption
- Adoption out of Long-term Foster Care Placements
- Adoption under Irish Law of certain children adopted abroad

Each of these strands is described briefly in the following paragraphs.

2.1.1.1 Stranger Adoption
As the title suggests this strand of adoption involves transferring the legal parenting rights and responsibilities to a stranger – a person or persons unconnected with the child in question. This was the main form of adoption in Ireland for many years after the introduction of the Adoption Act, 1952. However, there has been the steady decline in the number of children available for adoption domestically, as birth parents have better supports to help them rear their own children. Domestic adoptions made under the 1952 Act reached a peak in 1967 when 1,493 orders were granted. In 2001, 293 such orders were made, but 196 of these were in respect of family adoptions. Only eighty-one of the orders in 2001 were in respect of children placed for adoption by the Health Boards and Registered Adoption Societies. As there are far more couples wanting to adopt than there are children available for adoption, not every couple who apply to an adoption agency will be successful in proceeding through the adoption process.

2.1.1.2 Step-Parent (Family) Adoptions
Most family adoption applications are made in step-parent situations where a birth mother has a child outside of marriage and she subsequently marries a man who is not the birth father of the child and she and her husband apply jointly to adopt the child into their marriage. Applications are made in such cases in order that the birth mother’s husband can establish legal rights in respect of the child and to ensure the child’s inheritance rights within the family unit. In such circumstances the birth mother has to give up her sole legal rights in respect of her child and both she and her husband take on joint legal rights and responsibilities in respect of the child. There were approximately 220 applications in this category in the latest year for which figures were available. The possibility of adopting children from a previous marriage into a new marriage of a widow or widower is not allowed in Irish Law at present.

2.1.1.3 Relative Adoption
There has been a long tradition in many families in Ireland of children being reared within their extended family. The practice of rearing the child of a son, daughter or sibling within the extended family remains a feature of life and may lead to an application to adopt a child who is a relative.
2.1.1.4 Adoptions out of Long-term Foster Care
This category relates to a small number of cases each year, where children who were in long-term foster care are adopted by their foster parents. Of the 81 cases referred to as stranger adoptions in 2001, 23 were children in long-term foster care. The legal basis for this type of adoption is where parental consent is given or High Court orders are given under the 1988 legislation.

2.1.1.5 Adoption under Irish Law of Certain Children adopted Abroad
The Adoption Board also makes Irish Adoption Orders in respect of a small number of children who were originally placed for adoption overseas. Prospective adoptive parents are granted simple adoption orders in third countries (mostly Guatemala, India and Paraguay). As these adoptions are not recognizable under Irish Law, the prospective adoptive parents apply directly to the Adoption Board for Irish adoption orders in respect of these children, either with the consent of the birth parent(s) or through the High Court under the Adoption Act, 1988. Couples adopting from India are granted guardianship by the Indian court and then adopt the children under Irish Law. Occasionally, other situations arise, such as where a child was fostered while the applicants were resident in another jurisdiction, and when they move to Ireland they may apply to adopt the child.

2.1.2 Processing of Domestic Adoption Applications
Currently applications for the various forms of domestic adoption are processed differently. Assessments for ‘Stranger Adoptions’ and long-term foster care placements are processed by health boards/adoption agencies. A couple wishing to have a child placed with them for adoption will apply to a “Registered Adoption Agency” or their local health board. As there are far more couples wanting to adopt than there are children available for adoption, not every couple who apply to an adoption agency will be successful in proceeding through the adoption process. A couple being considered by an adoption agency will have to undergo a detailed assessment. The purpose of this is to establish the couple’s suitability as prospective adoptive parents.

Matching of a child eligible for adoption and prospective adopters and placement considerations follow. If a couple is accepted by an adoption agency and have a child placed with them, the next step is to apply to the Adoption Board for an adoption order. Certain documents must be provided to the Board as evidence to support the application. The Adoption Board cannot make an adoption order unless it is satisfied as to the suitability of the adopting parents. The Board assigns one of its team of social workers to deal with the application, and the worker will normally make at least two visits to the applicants’ home. A report is submitted with a recommendation as to whether the adoption should proceed or not. The Adoption Board usually does not finalize an adoption until the adopting parents have had the child in question in their care for at least six months. When the Board is satisfied that an adoption is ready to be finalized, it will invite the adopting parents to attend a Board hearing with the child. At the hearing the applicants are asked certain questions on oath in order to establish their identity and eligibility to adopt in accordance with the law. If the Board is satisfied as to the applicants eligibility and suitability to adopt, it will then make an adoption order for the case.
Step-parent, relative and adoption under Irish law are carried out directly by the Adoption Board staff. At present applications for adoption orders in the case of family adoptions are passed to the social workers in the Adoption Board who carry out an assessment and provide a recommendation to accept, reject or defer the application. In these cases the Adoption Board makes adoption orders also where it is satisfied as to eligibility and suitability. A service is offered to both birth parents in all adoptions by the Adoption Board social workers.

2.1.3 Report of Domestic Adoption Sub-Group
The Report of the Domestic Adoption Sub-Group provides a significant part of background context for this Standardised Framework. The Report has set out a series of recommendations which impact on this area, and its recommendations are taken as context markers for the development of the Standardised Framework. The recommendations in the Report are set out in full in Appendix 2 of this document. These particular recommendations are considered further in the relevant later sections of this document. One of the main recommendations of the Sub-Group on Domestic Adoption is that health boards and adoption agencies carry out all domestic adoption assessment, thus removing this service provision from the Adoption Board’s social work service. This recommendation is based on the principle of providing locally based services, as part of an integrated model of service delivery. While a time scale for this change is not yet agreed, the preparation of this Guide is intended to coincide with and facilitate this transition. The resource implications of this change should not be underestimated, and arrangements will need to be in place in advance of any alterations to the present service provision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2.1</th>
<th>SUMMARY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FIVE DOMESTIC ADOPTION SUB-CATEGORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Description</strong></td>
<td><strong>FAMILY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Step-Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
<td>Existing Connection and Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal relationship</td>
<td>Mother already has, but wishes to share with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Practice</td>
<td>Adoption Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposed Practice</td>
<td>Health Board/ Adoption Agencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1.4 Trends in Domestic Adoption
There has been a consistent reduction in the number of domestic adoption orders made by the Adoption Board in recent years. However the level of application is reported in the Adoption Boards Annual Report (2002) to have remained stable in the latest years for which figures are available (2001 & 2002). The decline may reflect the complexity of individual cases where issues such as the health of the child, difficulties in notifying birth fathers and the birth mother’s psychological well-being may all delay placement in the case of stranger adoptions.

2.2 Principles and Practice in Domestic Adoption Assessment

2.2.1 Introduction
Adoption is a service which primarily meets the needs of children, while also addressing the needs of birth parents and prospective adopters. These needs are complementary rather than conflictual for the most part.

There is a set of values implicit in adoption work that can be usefully re-stated as follows:

- It is best for children to be brought up if at all possible by their birth family;
- It is best for children to grow up as part of a family which can meet their needs;
- The child’s needs should be at the centre of consideration of all aspects of adoption;
- The child’s own ideas about what is going on and what arrangements should be made for them need to be elucidated and to inform the process at all stages;
- Open adoption is beneficial, and is now a feature of many adoptions. It is not possible to attach conditions (such as requiring participation in open adoption) to adoption orders under existing legislation.

Adoption is located within the broad child welfare domain. Key considerations for good child-care practice include:

- Planning – appropriate systems and processes to ensure that planning for individual children is well-managed to achieve good outcomes and to prevent drift;
- Timing- delay in preparation and implementation of plans can have a very negative impact on children, and agency managers need to pay particular attention to this aspect;
- Clear criteria – policies, procedures and decisions should be made on the basis of clear criteria, which can be explained and justified and related to the values underpinning practice;
- Information – good adoption outcomes require accurate, objective information which is accurate, complete, written sensitively and kept safely.

2.2.2 Issues Arising from Current Adoption Procedures
Questions arise on a number of aspects of current domestic adoption.

- The Adoption Board suggests in its Annual Report, 2002 (p 15) that “The possibility of adoption should be a standard consideration at childcare reviews in respect of children in long-term (foster) care”. The
recommendations for best practice in this guide takes account of the possible changes in health board policies and possible refinements in the legislation which would facilitate and speed up adoption processes in such cases.

- How can agencies arranging stranger adoptions regulate the intake of prospective adoptive parents in a way which ensures the availability of families which can meet the needs of the small number of babies needing an adoption placement, and which can meet the wishes of the birth mother in respect of the kind of family she wishes for her child, while at the same time not unduly raising expectations of a child for the applicants and straining scarce agency resources?

- Is adoption in their best interests of children in cases of step-parent and other relative adoption? Are other options such as guardianship more suitable for children and their families? These questions are currently discussed with applicants by the social workers of the Adoption Board.

These issues are considered in the development of Parts IV to VIII of this Guide.

2.3 The Irish Context

2.3.1 Introduction

Building on the descriptions given in the sections on Domestic Adoption in Ireland above, further consideration is given under three headings - legislative framework, organisational issues and professional practice.

2.3.2 Legislative Framework

The Irish legislative framework comprises the Adoption Acts, 1952 – 1998. The important relationship between adoption legislation and adoption practice sets the parameters within which adoption assessments are carried out. Adoption policy, process and practice are significantly impacted by the adoption legislation and case law.

The first Irish adoption legislation was the Adoption Act, 1952. Over the fifty years since then, Irish adoption legislation has developed and evolved with changing social conditions. The era when the original 1952 Act was passed is characterised as one where stigma about birth outside marriage, and the need for secrecy around adoption were dominant. Large numbers of babies awaited Irish families, or were sent abroad for adoption. In the year 1967, the number of adoption orders peaked at 1,493.¹ In the 1980s the numbers of babies available for adoption had declined considerably and adoption and new legislation was concerned with inter-country adoptions, with the rights of birth fathers and with the mutual need of some adopted people and birth families to search for each other. Now in 2004, new legislation to deal with a wide range of adoption issues is being drafted, which will have significant impact on many aspects of adoption policy and practice.

While this legislation is at a very early stage in its development, the response of various bodies to the discussion document on the proposed legislation circulated by

the Minister for Children and Family Affairs has been considered in drafting these guidelines. This includes the responses of:

- An Bord Uchtála
- The Irish Association of Social Workers
- The Council of Irish Adoption Agencies
- Summary of the submissions to the Minister discussed at the Adoption Consultation Conference on 17 – 18th October 2003.

### 2.3.3 Organisational Issues

#### 2.3.3.1 High-Level Issues

There are significant questions which arise in considering the organisational issues relating the provision of domestic adoption services. In this section, a number of these are identified:

- In keeping with the recommendation of the Domestic Adoption Sub-Group, there is going to be a move away from Adoption Board staff being directly involved in doing domestic adoption work to health board/ agency staff.
- There is the changing context of Health Boards and a new Health Services Executive to oversee service provision.
- How is adoption assessment to be carried out? How long should the overall process take, and is there a logical and coherent flow to the entire process?
- What are the staffing implications for health boards and adoption agencies of taking on the domestic adoption role? How will this service fit with other related services?
- What are the implications of the practice recommendations? Should all children who are proposed for adoption have a social worker assigned to protect their interests, to be responsible for them and to act for them throughout the adoption process?
- What are the staffing implications in ensuring that the different parties in adoption are afforded an individual worker to safeguard their interests, to ensure that conflict of interests are avoided and to provide for better negotiated solutions if required?
- What are the implications of using separate workers for the preparation and assessment stages? If there is acceptance of the concept of separate workers to ensure clarity between the preparation and the assessment stage, what are the implications of putting this into practice?
- Is it possible that inter-agency training programmes could be offered to maximise use of resources, to address the needs of adoption applicants in different strands and to avoid lengthy waiting periods until sufficient numbers of applicants are ready to commence?
- It is important to focus on quality issues in assessment ahead of quantity of output alone.
- What level of increased resources are needed for pre-adoption and post-adoption services for all parties in the adoption circle?
2.3.3.2 Service Demand Levels
One of the key issues which arises in an organisational context is predicting service demand levels. In the case of four of the five strands of domestic adoption, it is the actual number of applications made by persons within the categories that will determine the level of activity, and the health boards/adoption agencies will have no effective control over this. Projecting the current trends may predict figures for the coming years in given areas.

In the case of stranger or unrelated adoption, the need for placements for children should govern and determine the pool of potential adopters to be developed in any area. It will be difficult to predict exact levels of need, and it will also be difficult to predict the mix of different (e.g., ethnic) potential adopters who should be advanced through the process.

This factor has implications for the agencies involved, and it will be necessary to develop the existing co-operation that is evident between the agencies to ensure that the best interests of the children are served by having access to a common pool of potential adopters. It is recognised that agencies currently liaise with each other if they need to go beyond their own resources to find an adoptive home to meet the needs of a particular child or birth parent. One of the benefits of developing and applying the standardised framework is that the transparent process should enable enhanced co-operation and trust between agencies. The changes proposed in the health board structures may also facilitate this broader sharing/pooling of resources in the domestic adoption field.

2.3.3.3 Staffing the Service into the Future
Social workers in Irish voluntary agencies and health boards have high levels of developed expertise in many aspects of adoption work, counselling of birth parents; assessment of potential adopters for domestic and inter-country adoptions and providing information and tracing services, which in turn informs present day adoption procedures. These experienced workers will play a key role within their organisations for expanding adoption services in the future.

2.3.3.4 Financial Planning for Adoption Services
The budget costs of the expanded adoption services will need to be worked out in light of the projected service demand levels, the staffing arrangements and other costs arising in the context of the revised health board organisational structure.

While the question as to whether the persons availing of domestic adoption services should contribute to the cost of the organisations providing services has arisen and been discussed, it is the view of the authors that, as adoption is a service for children in need, it should continue to be funded by the exchequer.

2.3.3.5 Service Management
The following are among the service management roles:
- Preparation of a Service Plan
- Coordination of the service plan with the work of other agencies, including health and education services
• Evaluation of success in meeting the service plan objectives
• Evaluation of success in meeting target timescales
• Authorising resources
• Reporting of outcomes

### 2.3.4 Professional Practice

This section was developed from the consultation exercise with existing practitioners and a review of a sample of files held by the Adoption Board. A small number of meetings were facilitated with practitioners. The key issues arising in this context are:

- Identifying existing practice?
- What is currently explored in Adoption Assessment?
- What level of consistency is there between the agencies involved?
- Is assessment relevant/ appropriate/ needed for the categories other than stranger adoption?
- Mainstreaming current best practice in adoption assessment. What is it? Where is it located?

It is considered that the agency’s work will be aided by concentration on three major areas:

- Openness in practice
- Preparation for Adoption
- Post-Adoption work

In delivering an adoption service, the following triangular elements of relationships need to be considered:

- the adoption triad - the child/ adopted adult, the birth parent(s) and the adoptive parents,
- adoption law, policy and practice and
- knowledge, skills and values of the social worker.

Given the emphasis in recent years on Tracing and Information services in adoption, it may be instructive to consider at this stage as an example the situation of an adopted adult who comes to the agency that placed him or her seeking information and possible re-union with the birth parents. The areas of openness, preparation and post-adoption work can be examined in the light of the adopted person’s views when they are talking to the agency. They have lived first-hand the experience of being adopted, and the complexities that fact had introduced into family life. Issues that might be explored include the following:

- Had the agency placed them in a home where their needs were met? Was the age of the adoptive parents significant for them?
- How had they learned of their adoptive status?
- Had the adoptive parents been given clear detail about the child’s original background, as well as ongoing help in conveying to the child the information needed to understand the past and build a sense of personal identity? Or had the powerful position of the agency allowed the worker to sift out what he/ she thought was relevant or safe for the adoptive couple to be told and timed the disclosure so that the adopters had little choice about accepting information?
- What was the birth mother’s experience of making an adoption plan and was she able to grieve for the loss of her child? What was the extent of the attempt to engage the birth father in the process?
- Had the agency prepared both sets of parents for the possibility of a future reunion of birth parents with the adopted person?

In this guide, the type of questions outlined above will be considered in a desire to standardise and enhance assessment practices, and in the hope of avoiding past mistakes and formulating sound current and future practices.

### 2.3.5 Significant Issues in Domestic Adoption Assessment Practice

#### 2.3.5.1 The Position of Birth Parents

It is expected that the practice issues for working with birth parents will be the subject of additional Adoption Board guidance in the future. Some aspects of this topic are discussed in Section 4.5 of this Guide. A major change has occurred in adoption practice concerning the position of birth fathers. These changes have occurred in response to the new legislative requirements arising out of 1998 Adoption Act. Birth fathers are now entitled to be consulted about adoption plans for their children. When being notified of an adoption application (usually made by the birth mother and her husband) birth fathers, are now offered an additional option of speaking to one of the Adoption Board’s social workers in relation to their views on the application. They are also issued with the Board’s information booklet on step-parent adoption. The option of a full Board hearing is open to all birth fathers being notified of adoption applications, but is taken up by only a very small number every year- for example, seven of the 175 birth fathers notified in 2001. A further six issued access or guardianship proceedings through the courts.

It is noted that the experience of the Adoption Board social workers in step-parent adoptions is that there is an emerging need for services for vulnerable young birth fathers to help them work through issues of grieving for their child, who is now getting on with his/ her young life in a step-parent family setting. This intervention could lead to a need for mediation service that focuses on the arrangement for the child in terms of access and contact following the granting of the Adoption Order.

To achieve an element of inclusiveness, the Adoption Board is of the view that in step-parent adoption, legislation should allow the Board to attach conditions to ensure that a birth father’s relationship with his child is recognised in law in the making of the Adoption Order, and that a birth father can have continuing access to his child after the making of the order. Working with birth fathers is a major issue in domestic adoption.

#### 2.3.5.2 ‘Open Adoption’

It has been noted that an increasing number of domestic adoptions (‘agency’) adoptions are ‘open’ adoptions, ie the birth parent or birth parents retain a degree of contact with the child after the adoption order is made. This can range from one or two visits a year to the sending of letters and photographs at agreed intervals. At present, however, there is no provision in law for such open adoption arrangements, and such post-adoption access is by means of a voluntary agreement between birth
and adoptive parents; at present all parental rights are transferred to the adoptive parents on the making of the adoption order. Nonetheless, this guide advocates a professional practice that supports open adoption.

2.3.5.3 Step-Parent Adoption
In its Annual Report for 2001, the Adoption Board raised a view that adoption may not be appropriate in all such cases and other forms of guardianship provision should be offered as an additional option. The Board have also highlighted the need for legislation to allow a birth mother to retain her legal rights to her child while at the same time allowing her husband to acquire parental responsibility over the child. Many birth mothers in step-parent adoptions feel very aggrieved that they have to adopt their own biological child as part of the adoption process. Notwithstanding the need for these changes, it remains the task of the agency to prepare, assess and make a decision in relation to applicants for adoption in this category.

2.3.5.4 Delays in Placements
A major concern in stranger adoption are the undue delays involved in placing some children in their adoptive homes. Delays are generally associated with complex issues governing consultations and consents. Notwithstanding the reasons, delay has huge implications for the children. Children are experiencing multiple separations which combined with other pre-birth and post-birth events run the risk of establishing or escalating future difficulties.

- It is recognised that the ethos in adoption and fostering are different, with permanence the hallmark of adoption and reunification with birth family as the ultimate goal in fostering. While good foster carers do not automatically make good adoptive parents, consideration of application from foster carers to adopt their foster child could provide an additional option for that child.
- The practice of not accepting applications from foster carers for consideration for children placed for adoption was changed. This is a policy that is current in some but not all agencies. Breaking established good attachments should be avoided if the foster home can offer the long-term commitment to the children in their foster care.

2.3.5.5 The Decision to Proceed with Adoption
“Adoption is a good choice for some children, some birth parents and some prospective adoptive parents. The work of the agency and the social worker is to see that sound decisions are made for the child and that both sets of parents, birth and adoptive are offered help over time with the results of the Adoption plan.” (Conway, 2000, p 305).

At an early stage of the process, before assessment of prospective adopters begins, it is vital that consideration is given, and a decision made, as to whether it is in the best interests of the child to be adopted. The rate and extent to which this can be clarified will be determined by many factors, but in particular when the agency is already involved in proposing adoption as part of the care plan. This is most likely to occur in applications in respect of adoption from foster care and in some relative care applications.
In the case of overseas adoptions, the decision-making in respect of placing the child for adoption will have been made in the sending country and the ‘best interests’ principle will have been used. Likewise, the general suitability of the applicants in this instance will have been established already as part of the decision by the Adoption Board to grant the declaration of suitability. In these applications, the main issues for consideration are the validity of the consents, combined with an appraisal of how the placement has been progressing.

In the main, in step-parent adoptions the issue of establishing if adoption is in the child’s best interests and the question of applicants suitability are two separate tasks which have to be considered once the application is made. The workers who are involved in both tasks must keep the separateness of these processes in mind. Once eligibility is established, the “suitability” of the applicants should be considered as secondary to the issue of the “best interests” question during the process. Where it is concluded that adoption is in the child’s best interests, the pertinent issues to be considered are clarified also. The focus centres then on matching the capacity of individual adopters with the needs of the child.

Where the decision is that adoption is not in the child’s interests, the process should be stopped.
PART III – DEVELOPMENT OF THE STANDARDISED FRAMEWORK FOR DOMESTIC ADOPTION ASSESSMENT

3.1 Key Issues from the Literature

As a starting point, it is appropriate that proposals being developed in Ireland should draw on both positive Irish experiences and best international practice. There is a significant body of relevant documentation available that has been assembled, reviewed and digested. A list of suggested reading material for the different aspects of adoption is included at Appendix 7 and a full reference guide is included in Appendix 8. As the principal focus of the project is the Guide for Practitioners, a written literature review in the academic sense has not been produced. However, a comprehensive historical overview on assessment is included as Appendix 6. The key issues and learning experiences emerging from the literature review process are incorporated directly into the contextual piece of the draft guide and support the principles and premises on which the standardised framework is based.

In reviewing the literature on the subject of outcomes in adoption, it is noted that the research questions have changed over time. For example, marriage stability was a key issue in the 1960’s, and although it is no less important now, it has been replaced by different questions on outcome such as race and identity. The changing social domain of adoption is the context in which research has also changed.

Furthermore, methodological differences abound in reviewing adoption, where different cohorts and different methods occur in different contexts. As with all research, it is imperative the findings from one area are not applied unquestioningly in another. However, at a practice level, clinicians may see valid patterns in their work which may not show up in research. While there are a small number of informative studies, adoption research in Ireland could be described as scarce to date.

Many of the issues of stranger adoption are already well documented, and in this document we attempt to focus on the issues for the other four sub-categories, where there is a pre-existing relationship between adoptive parents and the child. In four of the five situations of domestic adoption, there is a pre-existing relationship between the adopters and child.

3.2 Conceptualisation of the Standardised Framework

3.2.1 A Systemic Approach to Assessment

We have drawn on our systemic consultancy approach to develop an appropriate fit with the Irish context. As discussed below, we believe that the systemic approach is an appropriate frame for tackling the complex area of domestic adoption, with its multiple strands and the multiple interests involved.

A growing frustration with traditional family assessment which focused on past history, coupled with a belief that it was more important to look at a family’s current functioning, led to the introduction of a systemic approach to family assessment (BAAF, 1998). According to systemic theory, individuals do not function in isolation
but rather as part of highly organised systems, often with consistent behavioural patterns and beliefs (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

A systemic assessment model is based on the premise that the adoptive family as a whole serves as the context for any placement. The approach gives due attention to the need to achieve a fuller understanding of family relationships and possible points of strain and tension, as every member of a household will both affect and be affected by the presence of an adopted child (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). The systemic framework brings into focus the “who’s who” in the adoptive family configuration and provides a collaborative and co-operative milieu for the assessment process (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). Therefore it goes some way to make the assessment process “more open and objective and less dependent on the judgement and intuitive flair of the individual worker” (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). The richness of working with what happens, not just what is said, provides another level of evidence for assessment (BAAF, 1998). Most importantly, by understanding family networks and the systems which impinge on them, the systemic approach values and empowers adults and children alike, giving voice to all the significant family members (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

The content of systemic assessment includes material from the applicant’s own life experience and how this has influenced them as adults. However, the focus is firmly on the present as opposed to the past. By identifying the systems and sub-systems which make up the day to day lives of potential carers, the applicants, together with the social worker, are freed to explore behaviours and relationships, the routines and rituals, the family rules and boundaries, the support networks and stresses. Terminology in systemic theory such as recursiveness, circularity or reflexivity all capture the dynamic and evolving process whereby new information is absorbed, reflected upon and shapes future ideas and actions (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

The British Agency for Adoption and Fostering, the Child Welfare League of America and the Adoption Legislative Review Committee in Western Australia all embrace the current orthodoxy surrounding the systemic perspective. They provide a guide for understanding the assessment process and represent a reflection of current practice in adoption assessment. The central aim of assessment as outlined by BAAF (1996), is to help families understand how children’s emotional well-being and behaviour will be affected by their early experiences. Thus a realistic understanding of the needs and behaviour of children who need adoption and of the adoption relationship’s impact on them can be formed (CWLA, 1988). A parallel objective is to help families understand what parenting another person’s child will be like for all members of the family. BAAF’s information guide advocates the need for openness throughout the assessment process. Particular attention is paid to the need for applicants to be open and honest in terms of how flexible they are prepared to be about the sort of child they would consider for adoption. Openness is also recommended in terms of divulging information regarding family.

3.2.2 Existing Practice
The Guide has not been developed in a “green-field” situation, and both existing and proposed arrangements and practice have been taken account of. This has been validated against the international best practices emerging from the literature review, and factored into the conceptualisation of the Guide.
Part of the basis underpinning the Guide is the emphasis on adjusting current domestic adoption processes to achieve a standardised, effective and efficient service throughout the State. There is also a desire to make the domestic adoption process consistent with the inter-country adoption process where possible (Section 2.1 of ITT).

While the value of the Standardised Framework for Inter-Country Adoption Assessment practice has been noted, there are inherent differences between domestic and inter-country adoption in Ireland. These include:

- The child at the centre of four of the five strands of domestic adoption is not the “hypothetical” child as in ICA, but rather has a pre-existing relationship with the adoptive applicants.
- The provision of Domestic Adoption is in response to the need emerging in an Irish context. There is no statutory right to an assessment for “strangers” in domestic adoption as is the case in ICA under the Adoption Act, 1991. Individual applicants for any of the strands of domestic adoption do not have recourse to a legal right to assessment like ICA applicants. The actual need for placing children determines service delivery. At an early stage the agency may conclude that it is not in the best interests of a child to be adopted and halt the process.
- There is a need to consider issues of eligibility and suitability in domestic adoption where rationing is a feature. Agencies have used their own “criteria”, reflecting individual agency policy, to determine who they would accept as prospective adopters prior to completion of home study. Factors such as age, religion, childlessness have been used by individual agencies either as rationing criteria or as a policy to meet the needs of the child or the birth mother’s wish. This has led to some confusion of terms, as “eligibility” as specified in law is narrow.
- There are the five different strands identified in domestic adoption.
- There is need for a much greater emphasis on “matching” adoptive parent skills with the real child’s needs in the domestic adoption situation. In ICA the agency’s involvement in the process is narrow and leads to a declaration, which currently states the number of children in the proposed match. The matching process takes place elsewhere. In the domestic adoption process, additional stages, being the assessment of the child’s needs and best interests should take place at an early stage and the matching of prospective adopters’ capacity to meet the identified needs of the child are part of the process in which the agency is involved.
- There is no statutory basis for assessment for domestic adoption, and differences exist in how suitability has been assessed and used in inter-country and domestic adoption decision-making.

For these reasons the conceptualisation of a Framework cannot simply take the inter-country adoption framework and transpose it for the domestic situations. Many of the principles and approaches are relevant, but from our review of the field, it is evident that a comprehensive overview of the subject is required, as well as each strand requiring its own analysis to identify and cater for the particular needs of that strand.
As noted above, while there will be common elements in the standardised framework, the issues for the five individual strands of domestic adoption need to be considered in the various stages of the adoption process. In effect this creates a matrix with the five sub-categories of domestic adoption and the proposed stages of the adoption process.

The approach proposed also requires developing an integrated framework catering for the different requirements. These include:

- Holding the interests of the child as paramount.
- The efficient use of scarce resources in the health boards and adoption agencies.
- Ensuring appropriate “customer service” aspects for prospective adopters.
- Providing for appropriate monitoring and evaluation of services at both Health Board and Adoption Agencies and Adoption Board.
- The need to cover issues, but also retain flexibility regarding relevance for the different types of adoption.
- Use Approach, Method and Technique as a frame, where:
  - Approach – High level process
  - Method – System of organising how it is done eg 5 stages;
  - Technique – What is covered (menu) and how (interviews, training and written report using different headings) is it covered in the room
- Dealing with key issues identified.

3.3 The Five Standards for Adoption

There is a set of overarching standards, derived from good practice in the field of adoption which provide a common thread through the preparation, home study and decision-making stage. These include:

- The capacity of applicants to safeguard the child throughout his or her childhood

- The capacity of applicants to provide the child with family life that will promote his or her development and well-being and have 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 the family find themselves in, the applicants will be able to demonstrate their understanding of the importance of maintaining an ongoing and meaningful relationship with their child.

- The capacity of applicants to provide an environment where the child’s origin or relevant other relationships outside of the adoption family will be valued and appropriately promoted throughout childhood. This will include the capacity of the parents to recognise the differences between themselves and their child within these areas and to recognise and try to promote positive views.
• The capacity of applicants to recognise and understand the impact of being an adopted child on the development of the child’s identity throughout their childhood and beyond.

• The capacity of applicants to recognise the need for and to arrange for appropriate support and intervention from health, social services, educational and other services throughout childhood.

These standards inform the structure of the preparation course with its strong emphasis on information, education and support. The link between this course and the home study/assessment is through the tasks that applicants are encouraged to undertake between sessions and to document in the preparation course workbook. This has the objective of helping the applicants to prepare themselves for the home study and to contribute towards compiling the final report undertaken by the social worker.

In preparing this material the applicants are being asked to think about and discuss what issues they might need to, or have needed to address and the changes that they might need to, or have had to make to prepare a place in their lives for the adopted child. Whether the situation is in relation to a hypothetical child, or in relation to a pre-existing relationship, this work will provide a tangible and detailed picture of the thinking, planning and actions the applicants have undertaken and will provide the assessing social worker with helpful material for the home study. It should also provide a good indication of the applicants’ capacity to meet the criteria set out in the standards. (See also Section 5.4 on Preparation Workbook and issues that might be useful for inclusion.)

3.4 The Standardised Framework for Domestic Adoption Assessment

The current practices around assessment were described in Section 2.2. The general approach, contained in contextual and organisational issues impacting on Domestic Adoption, has been reviewed also in Section 2.3. The framework is intended to build on and integrate the many strengths of practice that were observed in the research, and to address those weaknesses which were evident. In particular this Framework makes provision for the full range of aspects of the Domestic Adoption process, and not just the Assessment part. The frame of quality and excellence in service, efficiency, accountability and openness of decision-making are woven throughout the proposed process. Specific issues include:

• Establishing that adoption is in the best interests of the child;
• Safeguarding and ensuring the adopters can provide a safe environment for the child;
• Preparation and developing the adopters capacity to meet the child’s developmental needs;
• Assessment – assessing the prospective adopters capacity to meet the developmental needs of the child, including the capacity to cope with the ‘adoption dimension’.
In four of the five domestic adoption categories the process is about assessing the capacity to meet an identified child’s needs, rather than the generic needs of other adoptions (eg ICA) where the matching of adopters’ capacities and child’s needs comes later.

Typical timescales for each element of the Standard Framework are discussed and proposed, similar to the ICA Framework. In a public service environment where performance indicators are increasingly significant, agencies will need to monitor and report their performance against these time-based criteria. While aiming for consistent output, agencies and their staff should continue to value the quality dimension of the assessment process, given the long-term impact of their work on many lives. Social workers should use flexibility and judgement to ensure that their work meets the needs of all involved. The support, consultation and supervision arrangements within the agency should ensure the services are delivered efficiently and well, by professionally competent staff.

It is intended that the Framework should:
- be planned and delivered as an integrated whole, and not done in a start/stop fashion;
- facilitate consistency and confidence, by creating a shared understanding of the process, the reasons behind it, and what it seeks to achieve among the adopters, the social workers, the placement committees and agency management;
- Facilitate a level of flexibility.

### 3.5 Defining the Process Framework

The historical evolution of assessment through its various stages is described in Appendix 6. In the conclusion of that part, we express the view that, in many ways current assessment practice is a hybrid of some of those historical stages. No specific format has been devised to date for domestic adoption assessment, and it is therefore in our view appropriate that the relevant and best parts of current practice are used in adoption assessment. However, a high degree of clarity and flexibility is required from workers in this situation. It is for this reason that we include the systemic framework, as described in Section 3.2.1, as we believe it is directly relevant to and should underpin practice in this field.

The proposed process framework is a statement of the elements of practice that we consider should be included in domestic adoption assessment work. This reflects the stages and specific sub-tasks as shown below. Each of these is discussed in turn, and recommendations are proposed. A five-stage sequential process is proposed:

- **an initial information stage** where applicants are in a self-reflection mode, absorbing the general information available and considering if this is relevant/appropriate for them
- **an application stage** with a preliminary assessment where applicants are considered by the agency against specified criteria. In parallel with this assessment of applicants, one of the first tasks is to address the question “Is adoption in the best interests of this child”? If the answer to this is no
(possibly for reasons ranging from the child has no interest, to causing huge loyalty conflicts that may fuel emotional turmoil for the child), and as there is no statutory right for adoption or assessment there is also a need for the agency and the applicants to consider if they will proceed. If the agency decides not to proceed, the applicants will be informed in writing and advised of the options open to them.

- After a decision is made to proceed, a preparation stage where the applicants explore issues relating to adoption in depth,
- an assessment/home study stage where applicants continue the process of matching their experience to the intended task while the agency appraises the applicants, and
- a decision-making stage, where the agency formally reviews the applicants progress through the previous stages, considers the match between the applicants and the child and decides whether or not to recommend the adoption order sought.

The separation of the preparation and assessment stages, and the recommendation that these two stages be undertaken by separate workers underpins the view that the preparation stage is primarily a learning stage for applicants. Preparation is an (adult) education model, and does not contain an assessment component. It is structured to enable applicants to engage in a process of reflection in deciding if adoption is the best choice for them. If applicants feel that this stage is part of assessment, and they are under scrutiny, the objective of learning and reflection may be defeated. The learning from the education/reflection process is brought into the home study stage by the applicants’ Workbook. Having the same worker complicates further the power differentials involved in the relation between the assessing social worker and the applicants.

It is recognised that there are resource and organisational implications arising out of this recommendation, and it is considered this may be offset somewhat by agencies co-operating in the provision of courses.
**Figure 3.1**

*Stages in the Proposed Assessment Process*

**Initial/ Information Stage**
- Contact/ Query
- Provision of Information

**The Application Stage**
- Assessment of Legal ‘Eligibility’
  - Is Adoption Appropriate for the child?
- Preliminary Assessment of Applicants ‘Suitability’
  - The Decision to Proceed

**Preparation phase**
- Structured Sessions

**Home Study/ Assessment**
- Interviews
- Report
  - The in-situ matching
  - The Recommendation

**Decision-Making**
- Adoption Committee
- Agency Decision
- Adoption Board
- Making Orders
  - Appeals
  - Notification
3.6 Standards Incorporated into the Model

This section sets out the standards of service which are proposed to be incorporated into the model for Domestic Adoption Assessment Services. The development of performance indicators for public services has been part of government policy for many years now, and people expect to receive similar services in similar time-frames, irrespective of geographical location. Having identified the main components of the process, it is necessary to organise for each stage of the process, to set objectives, standards and outputs for each. Target standards help make the process and expectations explicit to the applicants, provide norms which professional workers and their supervisors can benchmark themselves against and enable service managers to plan and monitor the services provided.

Time-based standards are proposed as performance indicators, as they are readily accessible by applicants, workers and service managers. The similarities and differences between the five strands of domestic adoption, the differing demand levels within adoption agencies, the changing role of adoption personnel in response to external and internal changes in practice, are factors which can impact on the extent to which these target standards can be adhered to. Likewise it is recognised that situations can arise in dealing with an individual case which make it difficult to achieve the norms proposed. It should be understood that the figures proposed are intended as norms, and that there will be variations from these, where flexibility is required. What is important is that the variations are recorded, examined and explained and used as a basis for further refinement and improvement of service.

The following specific time-based standards are proposed for domestic adoption services. Individual agencies will need to consider the services they currently provide against these standards:

- A telephone response should be made to queries within two working days of receipt of a request for information;
- Written information should be sent in response to a confirmed query within five working days;
- A preliminary consultation/interview should be offered (subject to the status of the agency’s waiting list and qualification policy) within two months of a request following the sending of the written information;
- Where an application is made, the preliminary assessment should be completed and notified within two months of the receipt of the application;
- Where an agency and applicants decide to proceed to the next stage, applicants should be offered preparation within six months of agreement being reached to proceed. The preparation stage should be completed within four months of commencement;
- On completion of the preparation stage, the assessment should be completed within six months;
- The report on the assessment should be completed by the social worker within one month of the last interview;
- The supervisor should review the report and forward it for the Adoption Committee’s agenda within two months of the last interview;
The Adoption Committee should make a decision on the case within three months of the last interview;

- The Agency should make the formal decision/ declaration within four months of the last interview;

The target timescale for the domestic adoption process is that it should take not more than sixteen months (four months for preparation, six months for assessment and four months for decision-making) from commencement of preparation to final notification of decision.

### 3.7 Application of the Standardised Framework

#### 3.7.1 Introduction

In this section we consider the application of the standardised framework in which future Domestic Adoption assessments will be carried out in accordance with the legal framework as discussed in Part II. The Framework comprises five-stages of a sequential process as described in Section 3.5, tailored for each of the five strands of domestic adoption. The sequential stages are used as the junctures within which the overall adoption preparation and assessment is considered. While differences are noted between the different strands where required, in most instances the information covered as part of assessment is valid to the general adoption process. A pre-existing relationship between child and adopters at the time of application and assessment is a major distinction. In one instance the assessment focuses on the needs of a specific child within a specific family structure while in the other, the assessment is conducted with a future hypothetical child in mind. This major difference is taken into account in the structuring of Parts IV to VIII of this Guide.

The methods to be used for dealing with the different strands of domestic adoption applications are considered. Having identified the main components of the process, it is necessary to organise for each stage of the process, to set objectives, standards and outputs for each. These are set out in Parts IV to VIII of the Guide.

#### 3.7.2 Making it Happen

In all except one of the five strands of domestic adoption, there is a pre-existing relationship with the child at the centre of the adoption. It is not strange therefore if some applicants initially regard their adoption plans as their private business, and consider the involvement of Health Boards, Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Board as unnecessary, if not annoying. Many do not understand what the preparation and assessment is all about. Others would wish it to be speeded up, as they regard it as a mere formality.

It is crucial to make the process explicit to the applicants through the five stages. For some persons involved, there may be a lack of clarity about the purpose and functions of the different stages of the process, which can lead to conflict of expectations and role confusion. The objectives of each stage should be clear, and the activities related to each integrated into a logical and streamlined process.
However, it is the role of the adoption agency to ensure first that the proposed adoption is in the best interests of the child, and second that the child’s right to a good family is upheld. As discussed earlier, the adoptive parents and their family may face a major challenge, and it is the role of the adoption agency to ensure that they have had preparation, and in the final instance, have the capacity to meet the long-term challenges. While the applicants desire may be to regularise an existing situation, the needs of child and adopters are not exclusive or necessarily in conflict. For success, the process must help towards meeting both sets of needs.

The role of the social worker is to carry out the assessment on behalf of the agency. This can be a difficult and, in part, delicate task. Making the process clear to applicants from the start is usually a help. The purpose of the assessment should be explicit right from the outset, and the social worker needs to work to have the confidence of the applicants. The main purpose of the assessment and the report is to serve as a basis for approval by the Health Boards and Adoption Agencies. Workers in this area have, in their decision-making capacity, a responsibility to reflect on their own values. It is particularly important that, in raising challenges to applicants, views are not interpreted as necessarily being the workers’ own attitudes. Social work supervision should allow for reflection on these issues.
PART IV – THE GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS – INITIAL STAGES

4.1 The Initial Enquiry Stage

4.1.1 Handling the Enquiry

As a general approach, persons who are interested and who enquire about becoming adoptive parents should be welcomed, be responded to promptly, and be given clear information. Depending on the source, enquiries may be dealt with in a variety of ways. In most agencies, experienced workers will discuss the immediate questions/issues with interested persons by phone. Conversation usually cover:

- the categories of domestic adoption they are interested in,
- the policy of the agency (it is important that enquirers are informed of the status of ‘waiting lists’ and the ‘qualifying’ policies of agencies at the earliest contact. There is little point of starting down a road if there is not a realistic prospect of progressing the adoption process.)
- the process of applying to adopt and the preliminary assessment,
- the preparation stage,
- the assessment stage, and
- how decisions are made and communicated.

The response of the agency at the enquiry stage should be to make relevant information available, which enables the enquirer to begin to understand the process involved, and to begin to appraise the option of adoption for themselves. Different responses are necessary in relation to the five strands of domestic adoption.

4.1.1.1 Initial Enquiry in relation to Stranger Adoption

The response to an initial enquiry in relation to stranger adoption will be different to that in the other four strands. This is because agencies only offer this service as and when they have a need for adoptive homes. It would not be appropriate to engage with enquirers in a process of information sharing if there is little or no possibility of the enquiry progressing towards assessment. Agencies involved in stranger adoption should therefore inform enquirers about:

- The status of their waiting list (open or closed)
- When they are likely to reopen their waiting list
- How they propose to handle the present enquiry (is it noted and held on file until the list is opened again, or do enquirers have to make contact again when the list re-opens)
- The legal eligibility criteria, as well as the policies of the agency, which govern whether or not enquirers may be engaged in the process, even if the list was open.

When the waiting list is open, it is recommended that an information pack along the lines set out in Section 4.1.2 should be sent to enquirers. Agencies may also wish to include for meeting enquirers in this category at an early stage, as part of their process of deciding if it is appropriate for enquirers to proceed to the stage of making a full application.
4.1.1.2 Initial Enquiry in cases where children have been adopted abroad
In these cases, enquirers will already have been through a complete preparation and assessment process for ICA. In these situations, the material in the Information Pack referred to at Section 4.1.2 below will not be appropriate, and the enquirers should be provided with a specific information leaflet setting out how this particular type of application is dealt with, and the type of additional documentation likely to be required.

4.1.1.3 Initial Enquiry in cases of children in foster care
In these cases, the enquirers will have been through an assessment for the role as foster parents, and so will be familiar with the health board and assessment processes. The Information pack in this case should refer to this, and include reference to use of documentation and material from the foster care assessment for the adoption process.

4.1.1.4 Initial Enquiry in relation to Step-Parent Adoptions
An information pack along the lines set out in Section 4.1.2 should be sent to enquirers.

4.1.1.5 Initial Enquiry in relation to Relative Adoption
An information pack along the lines set out in Section 4.1.2 should be sent to enquirers.

4.1.2 The Information Pack
As a first response, an Information Pack should be sent to enquirers to start the process of reflection on the option of adoption. The Information Pack should include the following booklets:
- Each health board/agency should prepare and issue an information leaflet or standard letter on its own policy in relation to domestic adoption and the procedures for making applications
- Domestic Adoption – Information for Adoptive Parents (summarising the Standardised Framework and focusing on the Child in Adoption)
  It is recommended that there should be five leaflets – one for each strand.
- Domestic Adoption – Understanding the Assessment Process (summarising the process and setting out the criteria for eligibility under each strand of Domestic Adoption, as well as the approach to assessing suitability
- Information and Advice for potential applicants, including what is expected of adopters

4.2 Making the Application
If at the time of making the initial enquiry or following receipt of the information pack, enquirers indicate that they wish to proceed with an application, they should be sent an application pack. This should include:
- A cover letter or leaflet detailing the steps to be taken, and the documentation required with an application form. This should also set out how the application will be processed and the initial decisions made. The process for appealing this decision should be specified;
The relevant application form. It is recommended that there should be five application forms, which should include for assent to use existing material in case of ICA and approved foster carers, and including instructions re Health Status Report;

The following documents should accompany the completed application:

- Birth Certificates
- Marriage certificates (where applicable)
- Divorce certificates (where applicable)
- Permission for Garda checks on person over 16 residing in the applicant’s house
- Confirmation that medical practitioner has returned health status reports
- Financial statements, including a statement (position, length in post, job status, income) of current and recent employment or self-employment. Recent P 60s should be included. Summary information should be included of regular household expenditure, savings, assets and liabilities.
- Names of two personal referees, who will be asked by the agency to provide references
- Permission for use of existing material held by Health Board in relation to ICA or foster care applicants, as well as child protection and family support services.

4.3 The Application and the Initial Assessment

4.3.1 The Preliminary Assessment

The first step for the agency on receipt of an application should be to validate that it is complete and contains the required documentation. On receipt of an application with full accompanying documentation, an acknowledgement, repeating how the application will be processed, should be sent to applicants. If such a description has already been provided to enquirers with the information pack, the applicant should be referred to this in the letter of acknowledgement.

4.3.2 Eligibility within the Five Strands of Domestic Adoption

The application will be made for an adoption order within one of the five strands of domestic adoption as described in Part II above. The onus is on the applicants to provide documentary evidence to support the basis for the application in the relevant strand. The first step for the agency is to establish that the applicants fall within eligibility criteria set for each of these strands. Table 4.1 below sets out the categories of persons eligible to adopt within the five strands.

All applicants must meet the eligibility criteria as set out in the relevant legal instruments, which describes those persons who may adopt. If applicants do not come within the classes of persons deemed eligible to adopt, the application must be turned down and cannot proceed further.
TABLE 4.1
Eligibility to Adopt within the Five Strands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strand of Domestic Adoption</th>
<th>Categories of persons eligible to adopt within this strand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stranger Adoption</td>
<td>A married couple living together – this is the only circumstance where the law permits the adoption of a child by more than one person. A married person alone – in this circumstance the spouse’s consent to adopt must be obtained, unless they are living apart and are separated under (i) a court decree or (ii) deed of separation or (iii) the spouse has deserted the prospective adopter or (iv) conduct on the part of the spouse results in the prospective adopter, with just cause, leaving the spouse and living apart. A widow or widower. A sole applicant who does not come within the classes of persons defined above may only adopt where the Board is satisfied that, in the particular circumstances of the case, it is desirable to grant an Order. <em>It is not possible for two unmarried persons to adopt jointly.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term foster care Placements</td>
<td>Persons who fall into one of the categories specified above, and who have cared for the child(ren) in question in a placement made and supported by a health board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step-Parent Adoption</td>
<td>A married couple living together, where one of the couple is the birth parent of the child(ren) whom it is intended to adopt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Adoption</td>
<td>The mother, father or relative of the child(ren) (relative meaning a grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt of the child and/or the spouse of any such person, the relationship to the child being traced through the mother or the father.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption under Irish law of children adopted abroad</td>
<td>Persons who fall into one of the categories listed for stranger adoption above, and who are in possession of an adoption order in respect of the child(ren) made in a country which is not recognised in this jurisdiction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.3 Input from External Sources
The next step involves contacting those external sources with input to this stage. These include:
- The health status report should be sent directly by the medical practitioner for the applicants to the agency’s medical adviser for adoption services, and a check should be made that it has been received and that a recommendation will be made in the allotted timeframe.
- A standard letter should be issued to the nominated referees, asking them to complete the references in accordance with the Standard Form (See Appendix 3) and return them within the allotted timeframe.
• The request for a report on persons over 16 living in the applicants home from the Garda should be sent to the nominated authority within the Garda.
• The statutory child protection and family support services in the health board should be requested to provide any information they hold on the applicants
• Where relevant, ICA and Foster Care assessment files should be requested from the relevant section of the health board.

When these external sources provide their reports they should be used for the next stage, which involves considering the applicants against certain suitability criteria. In general, agencies should aim to conclude the preliminary assessment and the applicants to be advised by letter of the decision within two months of the receipt of the application (see 3.6). However, it is recognised that there is heavy reliance on external organisations, (and other sections of the health board), for reports in relation to some aspects of the preliminary assessment, and that this may affect the possibility of meeting the target.

4.3.4 Criteria for Suitability to Adopt
The 1952 legislation does not set out specific criteria for assessing the applicants’ “suitability” for adoption. However, in the interests of transparency, the agencies should specify criteria in their policy documents against which they will assess applicants. To assist with equity and consistency of application, recommended suitability criteria are set out in Table 4.2 below. These reflect the established “good practice” arising from the child-centred nature of adoption and are linked to the Five Standards set out in Section 3.6 above.

At times, the list for assessment for stranger adoption will be either open or closed, depending on the current panel of available approved applicants and the projected number of children needing adoptive homes. Given that there are more applications for stranger adoption than there are children placed for adoption in this category, it is important that evidence-based decisions are made in placing persons in order on a waiting list or in refusing persons access to the next stages of the process, thereby in effect rejecting the applicants, at this point. Agencies should have clear policy statements which govern practice in this area.

The applicants should be subject to a preliminary assessment against the criteria described in Table 4.2. Exact levels within the criteria for recommending/ not recommending or approving applicants are not specified. It is the overall capacity of the applicants in individual cases that need to be assessed. Otherwise potentially valuable applicants may be screened out through a consideration of one or two factors only. Decisions need to be evidence-based and explicit to the applicants. In making recommendations social workers need to recognise:
• That the needs of children are the paramount consideration
• The vulnerability of applicants
• The subjective nature of interpretation surrounding some of the suitability criteria

It is recommended that recommendations should be reviewed and endorsed by the Adoption Committee.
**TABLE 4.2**

*Preliminary Suitability Criteria within the Five Strands*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria/Issue</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age/Health</td>
<td>There should be a reasonable expectation on the basis of the available evidence that the applicants’ physical and mental health enable them to have sufficient energy and vigour to meet the child’s needs through its years of dependence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>There should be a reasonable expectation on the basis of the available evidence that the applicants’ lifestyle including their employment, recreational pursuits, travel commitment or domestic arrangements enable them to provide the security, safety and commitment that children need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>The applicants housing should be of a sufficient and permanent standard to provide a child with a safe and comfortable environment in which they can grow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Record</td>
<td>If an applicant has a criminal conviction, this may raise a question as to their suitability to parent through adoption, although the nature of the conviction and the age at the time may be relevant. Convictions for certain offences would debar an applicant from being considered suitable to adopt e.g. offences against children or adults. Also, the implications of a persistent record of convictions for relatively minor offences should be considered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>It takes considerable resources to parent a child through the years of dependence, and applicants should demonstrate that they have sufficient income to support the child. In the case of foster parents there may be an issue relating to continuing fostering allowances. Financial circumstances cannot be described solely in terms of income or capital assets. People with small incomes can have stable, more orderly finances than people in higher income brackets. The main issue at the initial assessment stage is to establish that the family’s finances are in good order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Relationship</td>
<td>Applicants for stranger adoption who are married will in normal circumstances have been married for a period (e.g. more than three years). This will be considered further in the home study where applicants should demonstrate their capacity to sustain meaningful adult relationships which are likely to be supportive to the stresses of parenting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past-Parenting</td>
<td>If a child in a household has been the subject of a child protection investigation which led to follow-up action by the health board, a full assessment of this background should be made as part of this application. Unless there were civil or criminal charges and convictions, past-parenting difficulties should not automatically eliminate an application</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be clear from the initial assessment under the criteria headings in Table 4.2 if the applicants will be able to demonstrate the capacities set out, and whether or not they will proceed to the next stage.
4.4  Adoption for Children – The “Best Interests” Question

4.4.1  Is Adoption Appropriate?
Adoption is a “means of providing some children with security and meeting their developmental needs by legally transferring on-going parental responsibilities from their birth parents to their adoptive parents; recognising that in so doing we have created a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child, who is shared by both.” (Reitz and Watson, 1992, p11). However, adoption may not be in the best interests of the child in all circumstances, and it should not be assumed to be so in all the strands of domestic adoption where it is proposed. Very soon after an application to adopt is made, as soon as it is determined that the applicants comply with the legal ‘eligibility’ criteria consideration needs to start on the question of the child’s “best interests”. The process and procedures for doing this should be set out by the agency and compliance regularly monitored. It is recommended that when compliance with the legal eligibility criteria has been established, this process should begin.

Other than in the stranger adoption strand, it is recommended that a specific worker should be assigned to represent the interests of children who are at the centre of proposed adoptions It is for this worker to assess if a proposed adoption is in the “best interests” of the child. An agency worker, other than the one assigned to preliminary assessment, may be assigned to this role, or the agency may engage an independent professional for the task of assessing the child’s interest in the process Resolution of this question is a separate issue to assessing the suitability of the prospective adopters. While the two processes may start at the same time it is recommended that this question is answered before detailed work is done on ‘suitability’ aspect of the preliminary assessment. The fact that there is reliance on external sources for this task, with consequent potential delay in receiving reports, may suit the sequencing of work. There is little point in using scarce agency resources on assessing the suitability of applicants, if there is a clear recommendation that adoption is not in the child’s best interest.

4.4.2  Care Planning
Adoption can offer children a legally permanent new family, which they can belong to all their lives. Adoption is therefore a key means of providing a permanent family for these children.

The objective of planning for permanence is to ensure children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond. A spectrum of options exists, all of which can deliver high quality outcomes for individual children. The planning process will identify which option is most likely to meet the needs of the individual child and takes account of their views and feelings. The options include

- Returning home to birth parents
- Care with wider family or friends
- Long-term fostering
- Adoption
The first and last of these options provide legal permanence. However, one of the other options may provide the best chance of emotional and physical permanence for a particular child.

For most children the best prospect for a permanent family that meets their emotional, physical and legal needs will be with their own birth parents. Where children cannot live with their own birth parents, the preferred option is to seek a home for them within their extended family, where this is consistent with the child’s welfare. In terms of making plans for children, social workers, other professionals, birth parent/s and the child should be clear what the plan is, and it should be set out in writing in a way that everybody affected can understand. The plan should set out clearly:

- The objectives of the plan;
- Key tasks
- Timescales for achieving the plan
- Persons responsible for implementing the plan, and roles of all involved
- Criteria to be used to evaluate the plan’s success.

4.4.3 Roles of Social Worker Allocated To Work With the Child

The section sets out some general aspects of the role of the social worker in working with children at the centre of adoption. Obviously, the depth of work will depend on the circumstances of individual cases, such as the care career of the child to date. In domestic adoption this may range from a child in the care system who has had multiple placements to a child who has lived only with his/her birth mother and whose application is in respect of step-parent adoption. The roles include:

- Develop an appropriate child-focused relationship with them
- Discuss the plan with them and help them to understand it including the meaning of being adopted and the time it will take.
- Gathering their views and writing this down in relation to:
  - Their birth parents and birth family including brothers and sisters
  - Other significant people in their life
  - The life and experiences to date, including a life story book
  - Their school
  - Their friends
  - Their hobbies, interests and sport activities
  - Contact with birth parent/s and birth families.
- Presenting their views in planning and decision-making meetings
- Arranging for them to participate in planning and decision-making meetings when appropriate.
- Providing a report with a recommendation on whether the proposed adoption is in the ‘best interests’ of the child.

It is recommended that the BAAF Forms F (2000) should be used to assess the child’s situation and provide the basis for answering the question about the appropriateness of the adoption.
4.4.4 Working with Children in Adoption
While the current profile involves younger children in both stranger and ICA adoption, there is a greater range of ages in the other forms of domestic adoption, and therefore the assessing social worker will have to communicate and consult with children in the families. To facilitate this, some principles of best practice for working with children are included here:

- Every child should have his or her wishes and feelings listened to, recorded and taken into account. Legally, children over seven have to be consulted. Best practice indicates where their wishes are not acted upon, the reasons for not doing so will be explained to the child and properly recorded.

- Children should be given clear explanations and information about adoption, covering what happens at each stage and how long each stage is likely to take in their individual case.

- Children should be well prepared before joining a new family. This will include clear appropriate information on their birth family and file before adoption, and information about the adopters and their family. Children are entitled to information provided by their birth families, which will be kept safe both by the agencies and adopters. It should be provided to adopted children, or adults, at a time and in a manner that reflects their age and understanding as well as the nature of the information concerned.

- Children should be matched with families who can best meet their needs. Children should not be kept waiting by agencies who are seeking the ‘best’ family or a ‘perfect’ family.

- Every effort should be made to recruit sufficient adopters from diverse backgrounds, so that each child can be found an adoptive family within the indicative timescales, which best meets their needs and in particular:
  - Which reflects their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language;
  - Which allows them to live with brothers and sisters unless this will not meet their individually assessed needs. Where this is the case a clear explanation should be given to them and recorded.

- The child’s needs, wishes and feelings, and their welfare and safety are the most important concerns when considering links or contact with birth parents, wider birth family members and other people who are significant to them.

- Adoption plans should include details of the arrangements of maintaining links (including contact) where this is possible with birth parents, wider birth family members and other people who are significant to the child and how and when these arrangements will be reviewed.

- Children should be given access to ongoing support services that meet their assessed needs. These include advice and counselling, health, education, leisure and cultural services and practical and financial help when needed. Information from agency records should be made available to the child when they are of an age and level of understanding to comprehend it.

- Children placed for adoption and adopted children should be informed of their right to make representations and complaints and will be helped to do
so if this is required, in keeping with general practice in relation to children’s rights to make representations and complaints.

4.5 **Outcome of Child’s ‘Best Interests’ Question and Preliminary Assessment**

4.5.1 **The Possibilities in Decision-making**

The two inter-linked processes of reviewing the ‘best interests’ of the child at the centre of the proposed adoption and doing the preliminary assessment can end at a number of key stages, viz:

- Compliance with the legal ‘eligibility’ criteria
- Resolution of the ‘Best Interests’ Question
- Decision in relation to ‘suitability’.

Also, situations may arise where inadequate information is provided with the application. In this case the applicant should be informed that the application is not complete and invited to provide specified additional material if they wish to re-enter the application.

If the legal ‘eligibility’ question brings forth a negative assessment, the process should be terminated at this point. If this is positive, the process should move to the addressing the ‘bests interests’ question.

If the ‘best interests’ question brings forth a negative recommendation, similarly the agency should not proceed further with the preliminary assessment of the application.

If there is a positive outcome to the ‘best interests’ question, the preliminary assessment of the applicants’ ‘suitability’ will get underway...

This further consideration may also have two outcomes. The first may be a negative recommendation. This can result if it is apparent that:the applicants do not meet the basic suitability criteria set out in Tables 4.2.

In the case of a negative decision, at any of the above points, the process will terminate, and the preparation and assessment stages will not occur. Applicants should be informed of the decision, and the reasons for this. In general, the social worker dealing with the application should meet the applicants to inform them of the outcome of the various sub-stages of the initial assessment. The applicants should be advised that they can withdraw their application at this point, or the agency can move the application directly to the formal decision-making stage. The social worker should provide a report on the application with a recommendation to the Adoption Committee, detailing the point at which, as well as the grounds on which the negative recommendation is being made. As soon as the Adoption Committee considers the case and makes a decision on the recommendation, the applicants should be informed of the outcome.
Where a positive recommendation results at all three sub-stages, the applicants should be informed of the outcome. This letter should inform the applicant of how a decision will be made on proceeding to the next stages, and when the application will be further processed. The letter should give an indication of when they can expect to be called for the preparation course, and when the worker will meet them to commence the home study, leading to a finalisation of the assessment process.

4.5.2 Appealing Initial Assessment Decisions
The decisions in relation to the initial assessment are made by the agency. It should be open to the applicants for adoption to appeal a negative decision arising from any of the three sub-stages of the initial assessment. Appeals should be made through the specified appeal mechanisms (in the first instance to the Chair of the Adoption Committee) on the basis

- That there was information available to the agency that was not, but should have been taken into account;
- That the procedure as set out for the initial assessment was not followed.

The Adoption Committee may accept further input from the applicant and the social worker dealing with the grounds of appeal.

In a case of a decision on the child’s best interests, where the birth parents are involved in the process, it should be open to the birth parents also to appeal a decision to proceed with the adoption.

Following consideration of the grounds of appeal, the Adoption Committee may decide to uphold the negative decision.

It is recommended that applicants should have a further appeal mechanism to the Adoption Board if the initial assessment decision is confirmed by the Adoption Committee.

4.6 Birth Parents in Adoption

4.6.1 Introduction
The circumstances of any adoption, whether it involves voluntary relinquishment or dispensation with parental consent, will be painful for the birth parents giving up children. Birth parents need to be supported to participate in decisions about their children, and to contribute to the making of plans for their future welfare. The primary focus of this document is on the preparation, assessment and decision-making about potential adopters. This section is included as an introduction only to the important work involved when birth parents are considering an adoption plan.

4.6.2 Separation of Tasks
While the work of assessment with prospective adoptive applicants is taking place, a significant and parallel piece of work should be undertaken with the birth parents, considering an adoption plan for their child. This area of social work intervention is deserving of separate examination, but in relation to the present document a number of salient points can be considered:

- The psycho-social support received by the birth mother will have implications not just for her decision-making around adoption but also for her long term psychological welfare;
• Research (Winkler and Van Keppel, 1984) shows that intervention and discussion is most effective if offered at the time of the birth and in the twelve month period that follows;
• Agencies should endeavour to engage the birth father in planning for the baby and afford him counselling in his own right;
• Services for the birth father should include attention to details of access to his child, involving in many cases mediation between him and the child’s birth mother and/or adoptive parents;
• Agencies should consider ways to empower birth parents to claim a say in the provision and delivery of services to them;
• Service to birth parents should include consideration and preparation for open adoption;
• Following the adoption, agencies should offer grief counselling to validate the reality of the birth parents’ loss.

The ‘best interests of the child’ at the centre of adoption should be the over-riding concern of the agency in determining the birth parents role in relation to planning for the child. Before reaching a decision that adoption should be pursued, agencies should have considered if services would enable reunification with the birth family and identified support that would be required for that option. Similarly, the possibility of a relative or friend of the child’s family who would care for the child and provide a permanent home should have been explored.

4.6.3 Services for Birth Parents and Birth Families
Birth parents and birth families (including grandparents, brothers, sisters and other people who are significant to the child) should have access to services which recognize the lifelong implications of adoption.
• Agencies should work with birth parents and significant family members to enable effective plans to be made and implemented for the children at the centre of adoption;
• Every effort should be made to ensure that birth parents have a full understanding of the adoption process, the legal implications and their rights;
• Separate from the workers dealing with the adoptive parents and the child, birth parents should have access to a support worker from the time that adoption is identified as the plan for the child. This worker’s task is to ensure that the rights of the birth parents are respected and their involvement is maximized within a context of the responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child;
• Birth parents and birth families should have access to a range of support services both before and after adoption, and should be informed of the process for making representations and complaints;
• Birth parents and families should be enabled to provide information about the adopted child, including the child’s birth and early life, the birth family’s views about the adoption and contact and up-to-date information about themselves and their situation;
• Birth parents should be given an opportunity to see and comment on what is written about them in reports, and in information passed to the adopters;
• Where it is in the child’s best interests for there to be ongoing links including contact with birth parents and families, birth families should be involved in discussions about how to achieve this successfully;
• Birth parents or ‘next of kin’ family should be informed by the adoption agency in the event of breakdown of the adoption placement or the death of an adopted child. This needs to be discussed and agreed with the adopters prior to sharing this information.

4.6.4 Working with Birth Parents
The worker’s role in assessing the extent of birth parent involvement should include:
• Whether the birth parents have requested that their child be adopted;
• An assessment of the parents’ capacity to focus on their child’s interests. Even where parents have not demonstrated a capacity to meet their child’s needs themselves, they can have the capacity to be thoughtful about them;
• Consideration of past behaviour towards the child;
• To form a view about involvement with the child post-adoption. Where should they be positioned along a continuum of appropriate birth parent involvement with the children?

Agencies should establish the wishes of the birth parents regarding the desirable characteristics of the potential adopters, and take these into account as far as practicable when making a matching decision. Where a birth parent’s wishes conflicts with the agency’s view regarding a child’s needs involving placement, it is a clear principle that the child’s needs remain paramount.

Where birth mothers relinquish babies on a voluntary basis;
• Work should be undertaken with the birth mother before the child is born, where possible, to ensure that the decision to consent to adoption is based on a full consideration of possible alternatives;
• After the birth, agencies should ensure that birth mothers have access to advice, counselling and support. A birth mother should be allowed at least a six week period after the birth before confirming her decision to relinquish a baby;

As the law indicates, agencies should consult birth fathers, and should make reasonable efforts to trace them. However, the effort has to be balanced against the impact that undue delay could have on the welfare of the child and their development. Early attention to the tracing and involving the father is necessary.

Birth parents should:
• Be given full and appropriate information and explanation of the process
• Have access to support from somebody they trust and have formed a relationship with. Where adoption is proposed, this person should be independent of the child’s social worker;
• Be given recognition of the positive contribution they have made to the child’s welfare;
• Be afforded recognition of the feelings they have about the adoption of their child;
• Be supported through the painful process of providing information needed about their child. Explaining the key purposes of the information, viz to facilitate a match, to provide the child with a sense of self, and with information on its birth and early life. The agency should discuss the importance and benefits for the adopted child of passing on personal possessions, photographs, letters etc and discuss this with the birth parents and birth family. Items provided should be given to the child when they seek information about their family of origin and reason for adoption. Copies should be kept safe by the agency.

• Up to the point of adoption, birth parents should be involved in, and be kept fully informed about developments affecting their children, unless they indicate they do not wish for this. As part of the adoption, decisions should be made on how, and to what extent, they are to kept informed

4.6.5 Support Services
Birth parents and birth families should have access to good quality, non-judgemental post adoption services that recognize both the short term and long term impact of adoption on their lives. They should be given written details about support services available after the adoption order is made. This should include information about local and national support groups for birth parents.

Where the possibility of meetings between birth parents and adoptive parents has been agreed, the agency should support the birth parents in preparing for meetings and in writing to the child and providing information. Mothers who conceal pregnancies are not necessarily opposed to a form of open contact into the future (O’Carroll, 2002).

Agencies should have policies and procedures in place for informing birth families of significant events in the life of the adopted person.

Birth parents should be provided with written information about their entitlement to representation in dealing with the agency, and about complaint and grievance procedures.
PART V - THE PREPARATION STAGE

5.1 Introduction

Adoption is different to biological parenting in several important respects, while step-families contain aspects of each. For these families, there are different legal processes and associated bureaucracy involved; they may be different emotionally and socially; and there are often differences in practical terms. Applicants owe it to the children who are at the centre of an adoption process to familiarise themselves with what is involved, to reflect on what it is makes them potentially good in handling the issues that arise from adoption, and to make themselves aware of the challenges and pitfalls that they may encounter. The Preparation Stage is intended to do this in a relevant, informative and self-reflective way. Approached in a positive manner, it can address and prepare the way for the next stage, which is the assessment/home study. The objectives of the Preparation Stage are as follows:

- To give applicants an opportunity to learn more and to form a realistic view about the strand of adoption which they intend to engage in, so that they can continue the process of reflecting if this is the choice they wish to make
- To give applicants an opportunity to reflect and evaluate their own skills, knowledge and ability in relation to the tasks & challenges that arise in adoption
- To give applicants an opportunity to meet other applicants who are at a similar stage so that mutual learning and support can take place.
- To help them to understand the full adoption process, especially the assessment part

While preparation, and the reflective state that it implies, is very relevant to all categories within domestic adoption, there are differences in the approach and the material that needs to be covered in the different strands.

In the case of ICA adoptions, applicants will already have been through a comprehensive preparation and assessment process, and so this stage will not be relevant for them again. The pre-existing relationship in the case of three of the other five strands also shapes the preparation required, but there are significant differences within the category of pre-existing relationships.

5.2 Arrangements for Providing Preparation Courses

While applicants may prepare themselves for adoption through individual reading, it is recommended that formal preparation courses should be in the format of group courses with up to nine sets of applicants. They should be participative, based on the principles of adult education, while respecting the need for confidentiality and respect for participants’ views. They should extend over a defined preparation period, and should generally comprise two to six sessions, giving four to ten hours of preparation. In the case of stranger adoption, dealing with a hypothetical child, this may be significantly extended.
Preparation courses may be provided through a number of arrangements, principally facilitated by agency workers and adoptive parents (similar to ICA model that is currently being developed). It is appropriate that applicants should hear views of people involved in adoption in order to get advice and comment, and to become members of a group where this way of family-building is a shared experience.

In the case of agencies dealing with very small numbers of stranger placements and a larger number of ICA applications it may be possible to combine preparation courses for both. This would optimise use of resources and avoid applicants waiting long periods to participate in a preparation course. Two separate sessions could be offered dealing with domestic adoption issues.

Trainers/facilitators for preparation courses should be trained themselves for the role of devising and delivering preparation programs. Facilitators should be familiar with this “Guide for Practitioners”, and the five standards of adoption which are integral to each stage of the process. The format and content of the preparation course are discussed in later sections. In general, it is recommended that the workers involved in delivering preparation courses should not be involved in the subsequent home study for the applicants who have participated in their programs. This is to emphasise the separation of the preparation and the assessment stages and to avoid confusion about what is taking place.

While recommendations are made in the interests of good practice and consistency, it is important that agencies retain a degree of flexibility in the approach to delivering preparation. This includes how sessions are delivered, so that the needs of individual adopters may be met in ways appropriate to them. However, there should be consistency in content and scope of the preparation sessions.

### 5.3 The Preparation Course Workbook

It is considered appropriate that each participant in a preparation course should have a workbook. The workbook should assist the participants throughout the workshops and should be:

- a personal record of learning/ development from the individual sessions;
- a record of the exercises and activities undertaken between sessions;
- a source of reference and reading material which will be referred to at different stages in the preparation workshops;
- a source of material to be discussed in the home study;
- a record of issues identified during the preparation phases which can be further explored in the assessment stage.

### 5.4 Structure of Preparation Courses

The structure of preparation should employ the group format with up to nine couples participating. Social workers and existing adoptive parents should share the roles of facilitation and presentation. Where feasible, birth parents and adoptees should be invited to have an input to the course. Health boards and voluntary agencies should consider jointly run groups in an effort to optimise the use of resources, although this...
may not always be possible. A suggested number of group sessions is between two and six, depending on the needs of participants.

Adoption is a unique way to form a family with changing and evolving tasks for the adoptive parents in a time horizon measured in decades. Adoption agencies facilitate this process beginning with the preparation stage when applicants in a group setting can learn the nature of adoption today, which embraces the concepts of need, openness and continuity of family ties.

5.5 Finishing the Preparation Process
At the end of the preparation process the issue of the separation of the preparation and the assessment stages needs to be reviewed with the participants. In general, no information should be transferred by the social worker unless child protection considerations are identified and need to be investigated. The circumstances and extent to which information may be transferred between the stages should be restated, as well as the mechanisms by which this is to happen.

It is recommended that the staff providing the preparation sessions may contribute by making observations to the participants on their view of key issues such as applicants grasp of information/knowledge, attitudes and values displayed and communication/relationship issues. The staff should be prepared to discuss these views and the basis on which they are arrived at. It is suggested that the results of this process should be entered in the preparation work-book by applicants.

At the end of the preparation sessions, it is recommended that the course leaders hold an ‘exit interview’ with all course participants and discuss their self-assessment in light of the work done in the preparation. Observations relevant to the assessment process should be raised, and where appropriate, some prospective adopters may be assisted to withdraw from the process at this stage.

5.6 General Content of Preparation Courses
The content of such courses should vary according to the specific needs of the five different strands of domestic adoption. However, a set of core issues should be part of each strand. These central issues are:

- Discussion of applicants’ strengths and how these can be utilised to meet the needs of their children;
- Learning about meeting the developmental needs of their children with specific emphasis on identity formation;
- Discussion of the assessment process ahead;
- Discussion of how adoption will have an impact on every aspect of family life in a changing pattern over time;
- Focus on the primary position of the child, growing and changing over time;
- The adoption process including professional and agency networks (legal, position of agencies, adoption board etc);
- Position of Birth Parents
- Preparation for what is involved in the remaining stages of the assessment process including the home study part and the decision-making;
- Backgrounds of children in adoption, and adversity experienced by them;
- Separation, loss and attachment;
- The “adoption dimension” including identity, birth heritage, openness, working with contact;
- Responding to children’s particular needs, including disability and race difference;
- Caring for sibling groups;
- Advocating for health and educational services;
- Legal issues;
- Training and support for adoptive families, including networking with experienced adopters.
- Adoption family life cycle,
- Child development issues and their relevance for adoption,
- Loss and Separation,
- Attachment,
- Telling the Adoption Story,
- Identify and family of origins ,
- Supports and post adoption services and
- Search and Tracing

Children in adoption may be especially vulnerable and may have a range of special needs. The preparation process needs to identify the kind of needs that an adopter can meet and to explore the day-to-day implications of these needs.

The profile of children being provided with an adoption service by particular agencies will determine the emphasis. It is likely the adoption population of children may change into the future if proposed changes occur to make adoption a more applicable option for children in the care system. If this happens, issues of abuse and neglect may need to be dealt with more in the preparation stage, in a way that reflects the complex aetiology of abuse acts and behaviour.

5.7 Specific Content for the Five Strands of Domestic Adoption

Some specific issues relevant to the different strands are summarized below. These will be further elaborated in Parts V and VI.

5.7.1 Step-Parent Adoptions
When a mother and her new partner apply to adopt, issues relating to the birth father, identity of the child and the child’s relationship with the step-father all arise. Discussion of such issues are essential, so that the adoptive parents can help the child have a real understanding of her past.

5.7.2 Relative (Family) Adoptions
Here the child’s identity may be obscured by the very fact of being adopted within her immediate family. The content of preparation courses for family members should have a special emphasis on openness in telling about adoption. The added dimension of the impact of adoption within the family network is significant also.

5.7.3 Foster Parent Adoptions
Content of preparation groups would, in addition to the core issues, examine the differences between fostering and adoption in relation to permanence and commitment, attachment to the child, relationship with the child’s natural family, post
adoption issues such as behavioural difficulties and the changing role of the agency following the granting of the adoption order.

5.7.4 Adoption under Irish Law of Children adopted Abroad
Applicants in this group will already have participated in preparation groups for ICA prior to travelling abroad and will have addressed issues of race, ethnicity and colour. They do not need a further preparation stage and may be excluded from this stage.

5.7.5 Stranger Adoption
Here the applicants have no pre-existing relationship to a child and are entering preparation and assessment for a hypothetical child. People attending preparation groups therefore need discussion of such areas as:

- The diversity of backgrounds from which children are placed for adoption
- The need to help the child incorporate details of their family of origin in their life story
- The ongoing nature of ‘telling’ about adoption
- Meeting the child’s birth parents prior to placement.
- Open adoption – the possibility and implications for the future.
- Medical issues
- Trans-racial adoption
- Attachment issues in adoption

5.8 Step-Parent Adoptions - Delivery of Preparation Courses
The present position with step-parent adoptions is that preparation for the tasks of adoption are provided by the social workers of the Adoption Board at the same time as they carry out the assessment process. Their experience suggests specific areas which would be well suited to group discussion. They say that because such applicants at present view their wish for adoption as largely a private matter, the way in which group preparation is offered is of the utmost importance. The emphasis needs to be provision of information and reassurance that the adoption applications won’t result in a change of day-to-day living for parents and child. Because of the more public commitment involved in group preparation, agencies should present a warm and welcoming attitude, with emphasis on the empowering element of having good information and learning new adoptive parenting skills. Applicants should be reassured that the purpose of the group preparation is not evaluative but educational and that attendance does not mean people have to divulge their individual stories.

The preparation group will likely have raised many questions for the participating couples and so it is recommended that agencies should provide social work availability following the group and before the home study or assessment begins. Unlike preparation groups for those applying to adopt babies and young children in inter-country adoption or in Ireland, the element of couples self-selecting out of the process has a different emphasis because of the pre-existing relationship with the child. Here the child is already in the family and the parents have self-selected by going forward for an adoption order. Unless the parents withdraw or defer their application because of the need to tell the child about her background and the need to inform the birth father about the proposed adoption, the stage is set for the assessment to go ahead, during which the child’s ‘best interest’ will be further examined.
5.8.1 Step-Parent Adoption - Session 1

Deciding to Adopt – Some Key Issues

- Welcome and introduction and explanation of what course will cover.
- This first session should make clear how the agency operates, what are the agency’s expectations in terms of the preparation group and subsequent home study and generally reassure people that sensitivity, confidentiality, openness and warmth will be part of what lies ahead.
- Initially, participants will need an opportunity to express views on the proposed adoption as very many birth mothers are angry that they have to adopt their own children in order to confer legal rights and responsibilities on their husbands. As discussed in Part 2 the legal framework of Irish adoption may, in the future, change to provide an alternative way for the woman’s partner to adopt without interfering with her legal relationship to her child. While not intended as a discussion of alternatives to adoption, as couples will already have reached a decision to apply for adoption, this issue needs to be aired and discussed in the preparation stage, where sharing of views and opinions can facilitate forward movement towards assessment and ultimate approval for adoption.
- The assessment process should be explained and discussed, as with preparation groups for all areas of domestic adoption, with a re-iteration that very few applicants are not recommended. However, for step-parent adoptions, reassurance should be offered that should an adoption order not be recommended, the child will not be removed from the family home (except in cases where the child is in an unsafe place). This needs to be stated clearly, as it is a fear uppermost in the minds of some couples who apply for a step-parent adoption.
- The first session should begin to address some central issues in step-parent adoptions such as the child’s birth father and identity formation for the child. Because these are sensitive and delicate areas for many step-parents, facilitation skills should be used to reduce anxiety, uncertainty and sometimes anger that the adoption process is forcing confrontation with the underlying feelings of loss and change. Helping the applicants express their feelings in a supportive environment is part of existing social work practice and will be beneficial at this early stage of the preparation programme.
- At the end of the first session, every one in the group should have an understanding of what lies ahead, the expectations of the agency and an assurance going into the next session that they will have the opportunity to learn new ways to tell their child of her background and to sustain an openness in this area.
5.8.2 Step Parent Adoption - Session 2

Telling about Adoption

- Introduction, welcome back and discussion or questions arising out of Session 1.
- Telling about adoption should form the core of this session. Step-parents who have already adopted are invaluable in this situation in working with the social worker as they have first hand experience of what is involved in the process and can convey this to new applicants.
- The social workers should provide the participants with some general guidelines on age appropriate telling about adoption, keeping in mind that the initial telling may not be the problem, but rather keeping the channels of communication open.
- In step-parent adoptions the question of telling the child about the proposed adoption introduces significant elements into the family dynamics such as:
  - The birth father
  - The mother’s relationship with the birth father;
  - Other siblings of the marriage who may not know the truth of the biological background of their about-to-be adopted older sibling
- Social work experience to date points to the complex and sensitive work required with all those involved. Such work can be informed by existing practice and also by Irish research in the area of step-parent adoptions (Loftus, 2003).
5.9 **Family Adoptions - Delivery of Preparation Courses**

As with step-parent adoptions, applications for family members to adopt are currently handled by the Adoption Board social workers. Because the child is already in the care of the family or at the very least has some pre-existing relationship to the adoptive applicants, the offer of preparation needs to be introduced by the agency in a manner that enables and supports, rather than undermines the family’s existing care for the child.

5.9.1 **Family Adoption - Session 1**

- Welcome, Introduction and explanation of what course will cover;
- This first session should make clear how the agency operates, what are the agency’s expectations in terms of the preparation group and subsequent home study and generally reassure people that sensitivity, confidentiality, openness and warmth will be part of what lies ahead.
- Social work experience in Health Board and Adoption Agency settings offering preparation groups for relative foster carers, highlight the strong need for participants to talk about their individual stories. For many, this is their first opportunity to talk in a group of other relative carers about the complex and often painful aspects to rearing the child of a son, daughter or sibling. Issues such as addiction, criminal activities and rejection of the child are especially hard for the carers to deal with because of the meshing of family relationships. Not all applications to adopt a family member will be for the reasons just mentioned but some will be. Social workers then should offer preparation groups informed by experience with relative foster carers and also by the Irish research in this field (O’Brien, 1997).

5.9.2 **Family Adoption - Session 2**

- Welcome back and discussion or questions arising out of Session 1.
- Helping families talk to the child about her adoption and what led to the family adopting, is central to the preparation process. The young child will need to be helped form a progressively clearer image of her birth parents, and the family need preparation for that important task. Social workers need to keep in mind that in family adoptions, the applicants may feel hampered in the telling process by the fact that they know so much about the child’s birth parents and may feel driven to withhold the more negative pieces of information. The opposite can also happen, as when the birth parents are presented as rejecting, unworthy and irresponsible. This tendency to describe the child’s parents in such critical terms could be addressed in the group discussion with emphasis on the child’s need to integrate both good and bad images of self and parents.
  - Considering future relationship and contact with birth parents
  - The nature and effect of the adoption order.
  - Attachment and loss issues in adoption

5.9.3 **Family Adoption -Session 3**

- Welcome back and discussion or questions arising out of Session 2.
- Social workers could help applicants design a life story book for their child who may lack a coherent account of a possibly fragmented early life
- Genograms completed by group participants can be used to help families tackle difficulties in the area of roots and origins by focussing attention on significant attachments for family members.
5.10 Foster Parent Adoptions - Delivery of Preparation Courses

In this strand of domestic adoption, the applicants will already be approved foster carers entailing as that does assessment and preparation. The latter will likely be courses attended such as Parenting Plus and groups facilitated by social workers and existing foster parents.

5.10.1 Foster Parent Adoptions - Session 1

- Welcome, Introduction and explanation of what course will cover;
- This first session should make clear how the agency operates, what are the agency’s expectations in terms of the preparation group and subsequent home study and generally reassure people that sensitivity, confidentiality, openness and warmth will be part of what lies ahead.
- Preparation for adoption of their long-term foster child will focus on basic information such as the differences between fostering and adoption and the commitments involved to provide the child with loving relationships intended to last a lifetime.
- The session acknowledges how the foster families have already nurtured their foster children, meeting their developmental needs and helping them in maintaining links to their family of origin.
- Medical Issues.

5.10.2 Foster Parent Adoptions - Session 2

- Welcome back and discussion or questions arising out of Session 1.
- Discussion of the impact of adoption on the applicants’ family and life.
- Keeping connections to the child’s birth parents open for the child where appropriate and in the child’s interest
- Attachment issues
- Explanation and discussion of how working with the agency changes following granting of the Adoption Order.

5.10.3 Foster Parent Adoptions - Session 3

- Welcome back and discussion or questions arising out of Session 2.
- Talking about adoption is crucial. As in preparation for other strands of adoption, the onus is on the parents to initiate conversation with the child. Themes of openness, attitudinal values of the adoptive parents and the ongoing nature of the process of telling all need to be addressed.
- Children adopted from long term foster care probably still have access with their birth family. The impact, if any, on this access as a result of the proposed adoption should be discussed.
- Because some foster children will have entered the foster care system as a result of serious family problems such as neglect, abuse, poverty and addiction problems, the adoptive applicants will need ongoing agency support to help their adopted child with their feelings of loss, anger and sometimes difficult behaviours. These challenges should be discussed in the group.
- Parenting an adolescent.
5.11 Stranger Adoptions - Delivery of Preparation Courses

This group of adoptive applicants differ from the other four strands of domestic adoption in one major respect – they do not have a pre-existing relationship with the child for adoption. Their preparation then will include some separate topics.

5.11.1 Stranger Adoptions - Session 1

- Welcome, Introduction and explanation of what course will cover;
- While the information pack for applicants will have outlined the agency’s policies, further discussion is now recommended. This first session should make clear how the agency operates, what are the agency’s expectations in terms of the preparation group and subsequent home study and generally reassure people that sensitivity, confidentiality, openness and warmth will be part of what lies ahead.
- Explanation of the agency’s general policies in relation to such areas as intake of applications, criteria for acceptance as adoptive parents and placement practices. To this end, it is recommended that agencies should have a booklet relating to its adoption services, which should be available to applicants from the information stage.
- Emphasis should be on helping participants hear about the diversity of family backgrounds from which children are placed for adoption and then with the agency, decide if adoption is a way in which they can become parents to a child born to someone else.
- A clear statement about adoption as a service primarily for children should not exclude an empathic connection with new applicants who have likely suffered loss through primary or secondary infertility and are attending this first session with great hopes and fears. A building of trust at this early stage can only benefit child, adoptive parents and course facilitators alike.
- The agency needs to give the participants information on their policies regarding assessment and completion of infertility treatment. Because couples sometimes fear “falling between two stools”, they may not tell the agency they are still pursuing medical treatment. This can put huge strain on the couple and may prevent them being able to fully enter into the process of preparing for parenting an adopted child with all the additional tasks that will bring. The agency should therefore encourage an openness through statements of reassurance that, if the couple decide to avail of further infertility treatment prior to their assessment, the agency will defer their application but they will not go back to the end of the waiting list. This approach is supportive to applicants while at the same time reinforcing the idea that, once engaged in the assessment process, the focus has to be on their decision to become parents through adoption with all the extra complexities involved for the family of adoption.

5.11.2 Stranger Adoption - Session 2

- Welcome back and discussion or questions arising out of Session 1.
- This session should address the losses and gains for each member of the adoption triangle. Group discussion and exercises on this topic can help free the applicants from the burden of feeling “lucky” to be considered as
potential adopters, through recognition of the major impact infertility has on so many aspects of peoples’ lives. This area should be discussed through general reference to research and writings of those who have experienced this problem first hand rather than an expectation that the applicant couples should have to share publicly their individual stories of infertility treatment.

- Focus on the losses and gains in adoption allows participants in the group to consider the losses of the birth mother in a way that counteracts some of the stereotypes of the woman who places her child for adoption and then moves on with life and forgets. This discussion has direct links with telling about adoption and open adoption, areas to be considered in subsequent sessions.

- Discussion about meeting the birth parents would be a natural progression from the previous topic.

- The group discussion will also cover the losses of identity, family roots and connectedness to the past which the child in adoption experiences. Exploration of this subject will be linked with its implications for the later task of adoption revelation.

- The session will balance discussion of the losses in adoption with the gains involved for all. Loss should be considered as a natural part of life which need not be denied. Overall this session will emphasise what Kirk (1964, p 172) describes as the “deeply satisfying aspects of shared fate.”

5.11.3 Stranger Adoptions - Session 3

- Welcome back and discussion or questions arising out of Session 2.

- The task of telling about adoption forms the core of this session. A link is made with discussion of losses and gains covered in the previous session.

- Central issues concerning telling are shared by applicants for other strands of domestic adoption. Such issues include:
  - the need to tell;
  - how to direct the disclosure process to meet the changing intellectual and emotional needs of the child;
  - how to help the adopted child understand her past and build a sense of personal identity.

- In addition to such central issues, applicant for non-relative adoption have to consider telling about adoption in terms of a hypothetical child. At a preparation stage for adoption, such applicants may feel compliance with the agency’s wishes about telling seems relatively easy. Discussion then should emphasise how, as family ties strengthen, the task of telling can become more complex and emotionally difficult. The agency should reassure participants they will offer help over time with the ongoing process of disclosure.

- The group should look at traditional methods of telling such as the ‘chosen baby’ idea and the limitations of such an approach (Conway, 1995).

- The social worker can convey concrete ideas of how parents can initiate discussions with their child. Rather than total concentration on the words used, the social worker can highlight how underlying parental feelings such as fear of losing the child’s love or guilt towards her birth parents can affect how the telling unfolds.
5.11.4 Stranger Adoptions - Session 4 & 5

- Welcome back and discussion or questions arising out of Session 3.
- Questions around matching of child and family are discussed in terms of meeting the child’s needs. Closely linked are the parents’ attitudes and feelings to the diverse social backgrounds from which children are put forward. What backgrounds would applicants feel unable to cope with? By Session 4, group cohesion and trust will hopefully facilitate open discussion of such questions.
- Placement of a child may not occur for a considerable time following approval as adoptive parents.
  - How will participants handle the waiting time?
  - How will the agency keep in touch?
  - When placement of a child is imminent, how will the prospective adopters receive news?
  - How long will they have to get ready for the child’s arrival?
  - What is the agency policy on meeting and getting to know the child before placement?
  - Will the couple have the chance to meet and learn of the child’s likes and dislikes from existing care-givers?
  - Will the child have had a religious or other naming ceremony? If so, there can be discussion of how the family might devise an adoption ritual to announce the child’s membership of the family – a celebration that could be re-enacted on the yearly anniversary.
- What will the prospective adopters know of the child’s background prior to placement? Will they receive such information in writing as well as in person?
- Will the applicants meet with the birth parents? Is open adoption a possibility? If there is difficulty in tracing the birth father could the family deal with a placement on a ‘boarded-out’ basis with a view to adoption?
- Following placement, what will be the agency’s involvement with the family. Will support be offered proactively or will the family need to request such help? In the unhappy and traumatic event of a birth mother reclaiming her child, what is the agency’s policy and practice? It is recommended that the agency should set up a mechanism such as a designated worker and phone line to offer this post-group service.

These latter two sessions address many practical questions, the answers to which may seem apparent to the agency. However, the thrust of the preparation groups is to make everything explicit and transparent for the applicants and help them move to the next stage – the assessment or home study. With this strand of domestic adoption, some applicants may opt out of the adoption process on consideration of all that is involved. For the rest the aftermath of the preparation group may bring up questions or issues.

A main objective of the process is that between the preparation group and the assessment period, applicants for all strands of domestic adoption would have the opportunity to think about and discuss the salient points of adoption and their individual situation. This would facilitate applicants and social workers moving ahead with the next stage.
PART VI – THE ASSESSMENT/ HOME STUDY PROCESS IN ADOPTION

6.1 Introduction

This Part of the Guide is structured to include the purpose and the principles as well as describing the structure and content of the assessment/ home study stage. The general topics to be included, as well as particular issues arising in relation to the five different strands of domestic adoption, are considered. This structure is used to ensure that the unifying themes and processes in adoption are integrated in this document.

The major difference in the five strands relates to the existence or absence of a relationship between the child and the prospective adopters at the time of the assessment. In four of the five strands, there is a pre-existing relationship between the child and the adopters. They are

- Step-parent applications to adopt
- Relative applications to adopt
- Foster care applications to adopt
- ICA applications for adoption recognition

The remaining strand is

- Applicants to adopt a baby/ child to whom they are not related – “stranger”

This strand is characterised by a preparation period in which the prospective adopters are prepared and assessed for a hypothetical child that may live with them at a future date.

The major difference arising from the existence or absence of a relationship between the child and the applicants at the time of the assessment is reflected in the two templates presented in Sections 6.4 and 6.5. A sequence of interviews and relevant topics that needs exploration are proposed within these two templates.

6.2 General Principles

One of the objectives is to have the assessment process as consistent as is practicable for all applicants, regardless of where or when it takes place. Reports of inconsistency may lead to a perception among applicants that the system is unfair and lacks transparency. Differences between agencies may lead to difficulties in inter-agency co-operation to find best placements for children.

The assessment process involves the social worker getting to know the applicants through a structured interview process. This covers topics relevant to the question of their ability to meet the needs of the adopted child. While emphasis on ‘self-selection’ helps to distribute power more evenly between social worker and applicants, the agency have the power, and the responsibility, to make the final decision as to the applicants’ suitability.
It is also most important in domestic adoption assessment to remember that the child is at the centre of the assessment, with needs growing and changing over time.

The assessment and approval process should be seen to be comprehensive, thorough and fair. An explanation of what is involved should be provided for the prospective adopters at each stage along the way.

The distinctions between the different strands affect the process of the assessment:

- In a case where there is a pre-existing connection with the child for adoption, the social worker has immediate evidence of how the child’s needs are met within the applicant family. It is important in approaching assessment in these situations to consider the capacities, and to assess the extent that adoptive parents are demonstrating the capacities to meet the child’s needs. Where the child is at and how it has been should provide the evidence base for assessment work in such cases.

- In the case of applications to have overseas adoptions recognised, substantial information may be available already to the agency if it has been conducting post-placement visits, either for purpose of post-placement reports or for post-placement support. If the worker who has been involved in post-placement activity is available, she should conduct the assessment and prepare the report on the adoption application, drawing largely on the work already done.

- Likewise in the case of foster carers making an application, it is likely that significant information is already available within the agency. Information may be available through foster carer home study, and the child care reviews. The foster carers may also have their own records, which they may make available to the worker to assist the assessment. If information already existing is being used in the assessment, the source should be made known to the foster carers.

- In the case of stranger adoptions, where no pre-existing relationship exists between the applicants and the child, the social worker is attempting to assess how applicants are going to be in some future setting with a hypothetical child. It needs to be acknowledged that this is an almost impossible task, given that research (Ripple, 1968; Lawder et al, 1969) has shown that no one piece of pre-adoption information is absolutely predictive of later functioning as parents.

In some of the strands in which there is a pre-existing relationship, the agency may have detailed information on the child, if the child has been in the care system already for a period of time prior to the application. Information such as biographical data, age, stage of development, milestones, medical records, the child’s general routine and how it is adapting in the placement will have been assessed, as well as attachments and bonding.

- In the case of step-parent adoption, the assessment will be concerned with assessing both the child’s needs and parents capacities (paying particular attention to the relationship between the child and the step-parent).

- The emphasis in the assessment in all strands should be on the ongoing need for learning about adoption, so that approval for adoption is not the end but perhaps the real beginning of true learning, reflection and understanding of the needs of the child of adoption (Cousins, 2003).
Social workers should be encouraged in their agencies to rely on their skills and knowledge and develop an awareness of how their own value system may impinge on their practice.

While there is a need for consistency in the material covered, agency policy should provide for a flexible approach in the content and format of interviews, while at the same time ensuring that all relevant topics are discussed. An inflexible, prescriptive type approach may create a tendency for the social worker to feel pressure to explore a list of topics in any one interview. Adopting a reflective stance can enable the social worker to carry on complex discussions with applicants.

It is very important that, if significant issues arise for the applicants in the course of the assessment, the process is stopped and focused therapeutic work is offered to the applicants. It is very important for workers to avoid role conflict, and there should be clear separation between preparation, assessment and therapeutic work required as part of the adoption process. It is envisaged that, while this separation should always be in the worker’s mind, the need to actually stop the process and to make a referral to another professional in the agency would not be expected to occur often.

While availability of resources will always be an issue, it is recommended that separate workers should be allocated to work with the different parties in the process. This will enhance the quality of the service, and is considered essential at key decision-making stages, when the needs of the parties involved may be at variance. One of the key issues is ensuring that the child’s interest continues to be represented when the Adoption Board social worker service will not have a direct case input in the future.

Agencies should support their social workers by providing regular supervision and consultation, where the dynamic of the applicant family can be discussed, methods of work and future goals determined, and generally enabling creative work to be undertaken.

As well as provision of day-to-day supervision and consultation, it is essential for agencies to provide in-service training to social work staff. This need was highlighted in guides to adoption practice (Report of the Review Committee on Adoption Services, 1984, p 48; Standards for Adoption Service, 1988, p 71) and is seen as a way to achieve greater refinement in practice and a higher level of agreement in decision-making (Textor, 1992, p563).

Agencies should also offer members of Adoption Committees the opportunity for discussion and further training, with a view to consistent and appropriate decisions about the lives of children and their families.

### 6.3 Structure of the Assessment Process

The assessment process is usually conducted around interviews with the applicant couple, who are seen by the social worker together and also in individual interviews. If there are children in the family or extended family living in the family home, the social worker should also discuss the proposed adoption with them. An interview with at least one of the referees should be part of the assessment process. The venue for interviews with the applicants should include both home and office interviews. It is recommended that at least one interview should be in the home, as it is essential to see
the accommodation, but there is potential for enhanced use of workers’ time if other interviews are held in the agency’s office.

The length of the assessment will be determined by factors such as the preparation course undertaken, as well as demands on the service, staff availability and their level of experience. Ideally, once the home study commences, the interview schedule should be pre-arranged between the social worker and the applicants. In general, a two-week time gap between sessions is recommended as appropriate to give applicants time to reflect on the issues raised. Applicants, in general, will have busy lives with work and family commitments to be met alongside the assessment. Generally, it is anticipated that the home study should comprise between six and eight interviews. In the case of ICA adoptions, the number of interviews and the time span should be reduced considerably, as there is a lot of current information available in the agency through the initial home study and post-placement reports. In general, it is recommended that the target should be to complete the home study within four months of its commencement. However, individual cases may vary and achieving the target will be dependent on factors such as agency resources, availability of applicants to complete work, and complexity of issues to be addressed in a particular case.

Irish research (Conway, 2003, p153) on assessment practice in the 1980’s shows that social workers in adoption cover a wide range of topics in discussion with applicants. There was special emphasis on the personal details of the applicants, such as their social and family background and their attitudes to the birth mother. The personal qualities looked for in applicants and mentioned most often were qualities of caring, maturity, fulfilment, warmth and flexibility. These are all qualities in line with guidelines for practice found in the social work literature. However, the research showed that, woven through comprehensive evaluation, were constant examples of how subjective much of the evaluation of the applicants was, albeit this was never adverted to by any of the informants. This subjective piece was seen to impinge on the prospective adopters, for instance when some couples lacking religious fervour were rejected and others accepted, some ‘shy’ husbands were spared the ordeal of having infertility or their sexual relationships discussed, while others were pursued and made to face these sensitive subjects or couples were viewed as either communicating well or contradicting each other when they voiced different opinions (Conway, 2000, p 173).

Before examining topics to be covered in the assessment process, then, it is important for agencies and practitioners to recognise the problem of defining in measurable terms, factors that are in fact ambiguous entities. While it is not possible to entirely remove the element of subjectivity (Ryburn, 1990; Textor, 1992) in-service training can help staff to:

- Consider ways of applying consistent criteria to their assessments,
- Refine their decision-making skills and reach greater consistency in decisions made,
- Make explicit to applicants the criteria used in selecting adoptive families and placing children with them.
6.4 Topics to be covered in the Assessment Process

This following section examines some of the major areas that the social worker will discuss with the applicants for adoption. The list of topics is not exhaustive and the social worker should feel free to approach particular areas in an order that seems appropriate for each individual application.

Where a topic has a specific significance for a particular strand of domestic adoption, this is highlighted. A detailed list of issues to be addressed, where there is or is not a pre-existing relationship, is outlined in Sections 6.5. and 6.6 respectively.

6.4.1 Marriage Stability

The quality of the marital relationship is a primary concern for adoption agencies. Consideration of the quality and emotional climate of the marriage is imperative because of the child’s need for security and stability. If this area is not thoroughly explored it can result in children being placed into precariously balanced marital relationships, which affect family life. This is reflected in the anecdotal evidence of some adopted people returning to Irish adoption agencies to search for birth parents and recounting tales of unhappy and fragmented parental relations that impinged on family life.

In talking to the applicants about this topic the social workers might discuss:

- How the couple met and the history of the relationship
- What makes the relationship stable and satisfying to both partners?
- What have been the difficult times and how did the couple cope?
- How are decisions taken?
- What was the last row about? Who set about resolving the row first?
- Has their commitment to each other been tested and if so what helped it to survive?
- If the couple had undergone infertility treatment, how has that impacted on all aspects of their relationship – emotional, sexual, social? In asking such sensitive questions, it may help to place them in the context of their earlier discussion in the preparation group where the social worker has already demonstrated her awareness and understanding of the impact of infertility treatment on many aspects of relationships.
- The nature of previous relationships may be relevant to the assessment. This will be especially so in step parent adoptions where the birth mother’s relationship to the child’s birth father will be an integral part of the proposed adoption. Involving him in the adoption process may raise unresolved issues for the birth mother such as regret or even hope of renewal of the previous relationship.
- Where an adoptive applicant has parented children jointly with a former partner, the social worker may seek information from that former partner in relation to any possible concerns they might have about the prospective adopter’s safety with children. This information would be sought with the applicant’s consent and reassurance that this does not give the former partner a veto over the outcome of the adoption application.
- Motivation to adopt can be explored with the applicants both in individual interviews and in the interview covering the marital relationship.
process by which the couple arrived at the decision to adopt can be a fruitful area to explore in terms of examining the dynamics of the relationship.

6.4.2 Motivation to Adopt

This topic has traditionally been of great concern to the social worker engaged in adoption practice. While biological parents could have children without ever thinking about why they wanted them, the deliberate step that the adoptive couple took required that “motives for parenthood be made explicit because they must be shared with the agency” (Kadushin, 1980, p 477). In broaching this topic with applicants the social worker may be helped by consideration of what the social work literature has to say on motivation to adopt:

- Literature references on the motives of childless couples applying to adopt healthy white infants showed that the most frequent combination of motives were inability to have their own baby and a general love of children.
- Brebner et al (1985, p 15) found a “correlation between uncertain infertility status and both low and inappropriate motivations to adopt” such as adopting to increase fertility or to please a spouse.
- Family crisis or periods of transition can be related to a couple’s decision to adopt. Adoption sometimes serves as a replacement for the loss of a baby through miscarriage or stillbirth. Parents with biological children sometimes adopted a child when they were experiencing difficulties and stress in making a transition from a nurturing role to the role of launching children into independent living when “the adoption prolonged the caretaking role of the parents and maintained the familiar system” (Talen and Lehr, 1984, p 387).
- Attitudes of family and friends can influence a couple’s decision to adopt. Views expressed can be discouraging, reflecting fear of hereditary influences on the adopted child. This attitude can be transmitted between the three generations of grand-parents, adoptive parents and child (Blum, 1983)
- Today with changes in adoption practice and the wider spectrum of children available for adoption, social workers need to re-examine what constitutes a suitable family with suitable motives to adopt. For example, in the random sampling of recent adoptions undertaken as part of the preparation of this document one respondent described social work opposition to the adoption of a foster child on the grounds that the motives of the applicants were seen as “using fostering as a back door to adoption”. This was in spite of the fact that the child and her birth mother both have special needs and the foster parents expressed motives were to continue to facilitate contact between them while affording their foster child the security of adoption. This concurs with Creedon’s (2003) finding in which she found foster carers were reluctant to raise adoption as an option for children in their care long term, for fear this would be viewed negatively by the social worker.
- In step-parent adoptions, Loftus (2002, p 26) notes that “it is common to meet adopting step-parents where a motivating factor in their pursuit of adoption is to reduce any possible stigma” and the stigma “need not be
solely emotional or social in nature as many couples adopt the step-child to ensure equal inheritance rights for the step-child and children of the marriage” (p 26).

- In the case of relative adoption the first question that occurs is “why now”, and how will this impact on the child/birth parent relationship? It is reported in international literature that fewer placements of children with relatives in the care system end up in adoption proceedings. In the USA, where there is active encouragement of adoption as a permanency option, relatives are reluctant to pursue this route. There are many reasons for this. They may see the child within the family anyway, and that there is no need to safeguard the placement through adoption as there is a total commitment to the child and the risk of disruption is low. There may be hope that the birth parents will someday be able to resume care. That said, there are some families who would proceed to adopt. This may happen when the parents are extremely young or where the family relationships between carer and birth parent has broken down to such an extent that adoption is requested by the carer to ensure that the child stays with them. There will also be applications for relative adoption where the child has not been in the care system. The profile of relatives who care informally for children in Ireland is not known. It is known that a number of relatives apply to adopt children who were in their care, but not in the ‘formal care system’ prior to the adoption application. Factors in such applications include grandparents adopting their grandchild, with a view to giving the young parent a chance to get on with their lives, or when a young child is left for a prolonged period in the care of the relatives, and the main psychological relationship is between the relative and the child.

6.4.3 Parenting Capacity

A primary task for the social worker in the assessment process is to understand the strengths and needs in regard to the applicants’ willingness and ability to be adoptive parents. This will include a focus on their willingness and ability to:

- Protect and nurture the child
- Meet the child’s developmental needs and address any developmental delays
- Respond to the extra dimensions of adoptive parenting by recognising and valuing the child’s history, identity and sense of loss.

How the social worker can make predictions about parental behaviour, based on observations of couples who are not yet parents, is a significant issue. To address this problem, the worker needs to view the applicant couple as people “in the process of becoming” and with the capacity to mature as the child grows. Certain criteria may be helpful in evaluating capacity for adoptive parenthood. These are:

- The emotional health of the applicants is a key factor
- Readiness to meet the inevitable behaviour problems of children is essential
- Parental compatibility in decision-making which will become a crucial factor as the child grows older.
- Flexibility in relationships which will accommodate diversity and respond to the impact of the child’s arrival in the family.
- Confidence in the parenting role which will help in day-to-day child rearing and setting of boundaries.
- Pragmatic considerations such as the family’s ability to maintain a home environment that prevents and reduces injuries and a knowledge of health, hygiene and nutrition practices which reduce the likelihood of illness.
- In approaching this topic, the social worker, while assessing for future parenting, can be helped by a focus on both past and present. Reflecting on the applicants own past experience of being parented can be helpful. What were the parts of that experience they would like to replicate with their own children? What areas would they like to do differently?
- If applicants already have children, then the social worker can observe their progress in the family. In this situation it is possible for applicants to demonstrate first hand their child rearing practices and many of the issues discussed in Section 6.6 are relevant.

6.4.4 Family Reaction to the Proposed Adoption

When a child is relinquished by birth parents for adoption it acquires not only new parent/s but also other members of that family as relatives. If these relatives disapprove of adoption it can result in denial of the relationship or even outright hostility towards the adopted child. It is recommended then that the social worker explore this topic with applicants to assess their potential strengths in protecting the child, should she feel unaccepted by relatives with mixed feelings about adoption.

Where applicants already have biological children, the reaction of the immediate family to the adoption merits consideration. The post Adoption Centre in London reported a high proportion of referrals of adopted children, isolated and vulnerable because their siblings shared a biological tie with their parents which they did not (Reich, 1990, p9). In Western Australia, the Adoption Legislative Review Committee (1991, p 107) was guided by research which asserted that the rate of adoption breakdown increased where a biological child was born following an adoption. The Committee therefore recommended that the adopted child be accommodated as the youngest in the family. The issue of adopted children having an increased sense of ‘difference’ where there are biological children in the family needs to be recognised and discussed so that applicants can help their child deal with these feelings.

In the U.K., the Department of Health (2002, Section 5.28) recommend development of a family profile including consultation with existing children in the family to help them understand the impact that a new child brought into the family might have on their lives.

Discussion with children in the family in a step-parent adoption will have additional aspects of which the social worker needs to be aware. These lie in the area of the children’s knowledge of the birth circumstances of their about-to-be-adopted sibling. It is crucial that children are told about the proposed adoption within the family. All too often, if this does not happen, the child finds out in another way through the family or community network. This can have a devastating impact on the child and family relationships in general.
Likewise, if relatives are adopting the child, the way in which the extended family hear about the plan is important. In some families, the factors that led to the relative placement may have a serious impact on general family relations. Some family members may support the application, while others may be hostile to the idea. In these instances it is not uncommon for many extended family members not to know the details, but this does not prevent sides been taken and opinions voiced. The presence of these issues are not in themselves a counter-indication to adoption. What is more important is the way the applicants propose to deal with it, and to hold the child’s perspective.

For the foster family, family reaction may also bring forth issues that need attention. The background of the child may emerge as an issue for some extended family members when an adoption application is made. Again, the way the foster carers propose to deal with the potential negativity from some family members is the issue for consideration.

In the case of ICA recognition, the issues of family reaction would have been explored as part of the original home study. At this stage of assessment, it is sufficient to consider how the anticipated reactions have worked in reality.

6.4.5 Expectations of the Child for Adoption

Older adoption outcome studies (Raynor, 1980, p146; Hoopes et al, 1969, p79) found that adopters’ expectations of the child for adoption were often unduly high and this was associated with later negative feelings towards school on the part of the adopted child. The social worker needs to explore this area, especially for applicants with whom children will be placed at a later date. The following points may be useful to explore:

- Adoptive parents need to be flexible, realistic and able to modify their expectations in light of an individual child’s history and needs.
- Asking about the applicant couple’s educational aspirations for the child in a general way only is insufficient and the social worker needs to recognise that pressure can exist in many areas other than the intellectual one.
- The social worker should encourage couples to examine their own attitudes in order to assist in planning placements where the child’s needs and the parents’ strengths are linked.
- In discussing the placement of a hypothetical child, the social worker should avoid a “check list” approach of what characteristics or behaviours the applicants could accept in a child. Cousins (2003, p 9 –11) highlights the flaws in this approach including the fact that applicants are invited to speculate on what ‘categories’ of children they could consider, at a time when they are under great stress about being approved as adoptive parents. However the many needs of the hypothetical child they might adopt could be explored in a general way and help form part of the applicants self-assessment.

In the case where there is a pre-existing relationship, as is the case in four of the five strands, the following topics may assist in assessing the relationship between adopters and the child
What they like about the child?
What they feel is working well?
What are the areas of stress?
How do they consider attachment, communication and discipline are working for them and the child?
Do future expectations fit with where and how the child is currently functioning?
How do they think the adoption will impact on their parenting style and parenting capacity, the child’s view of themselves and how others view the child?

In all adoptions it is important to consider the impact of the adoption on the family relationships. In step-parent adoption specific attention should be paid to how the step parent/child relationship will change as a result.

Likewise in foster carer and relative adoption, the change of status from living with family to being an adopted child may pose challenges for the child, even if this is something they really want. It is important to explore how they child may react to the change of status. A major difference for the child is they may have to let go of the idea that they can return to their birth family if the going gets too tough in the relative or foster carer’s home. They may have harboured this as a dream for a long period.

6.4.6 Telling about Adoption

This topic will have been addressed in the preparation groups (see Sections 5.8.2; 5.9.2; 5.10.3; 5.11.3) but will need to be revisited during the assessment. The social worker needs to discuss with the applicants what they have gleaned from the preparation process about the disclosure of information, the importance of the task and the agency commitment to ongoing help with the process. The worker needs to remember:

• The ‘telling’ may become harder as family ties strengthen.
• In step-parent adoptions many of the children for adoption have no knowledge of their circumstances prior to the initial social work visit (Loftus, 2002, p 55 and 62). Encouragingly, social work with couples experiencing difficulties with disclosure has proved effective in the Irish context (p 82).
• Health Board and Adoption Agency workers undertaking step-parent adoptions in the future will be greatly helped by the accumulated expertise of the Adoption Board social workers in this area, evidenced in the writer’s discussions with them, the social research undertaken by them (Loftus, 2002; O’Carroll, 2002) and the very positive comments received by respondents to the consumer questionnaire conducted as part of the research.
• In relative adoptions, telling is important and even if there are very distressed relationships in the family at the time of the adoption application, it is likely that a repertoire of good stories will re-emerge about birth parents as time moves on. Families may need assistance with this aspect as part of post-placement work. If families continue to reside in
the area in which the family grew up, the story of the adoption will be very much part of the community story. This may also be a major issue for step-parent adoptions. Particular attention needs to be paid to community as a potential source of information for the child, especially if there is a reluctance within the family to tell the story. This has implications for the child’s extended network of relationships. It is not uncommon for a child to go the same school as their half-brothers and sisters and not to know the situation until the children end up in the school yard together.

### 6.4.7 Open Adoption

The assessment period needs to be used to examine the concept and practice of open adoption. Factors emerging from the social work literature include:

- Planning for contact was the best predictor of adoptive parents’ comfort with post-placement context in Berry’s (1993) longitudinal study of 1,396 adoptions in California.
- Written agreements (Siegal, 1993) designed by birth and adoptive parents (Etter, 1993) which are child-focused (Fratter, 1996, p256) appear to benefit the participants best.
- In drawing up the agreement certain factors need to be considered such as the possible subsidence over time of enthusiasm of the adoptive parents (Hall, 1991), the adopters’ ability to cope with boundaries and extended family networks, the birth mother’s ability to acknowledge the adoptive parents’ legal rights, the availability of adoption agency staff to provide on-going support (McRoy, Grotevant and White, 1988) and the effect on the extended family (Dennick and Wafnre, 1988, p240).
- A shift in the balance of power has occurred between members of the adoption triad. “In the beginning the fertile parent holds the power. After custody is legally transferred, the custodial parent holds the power. In the end the child holds the power ……Everyone takes a turn” (Rillera and Kaplan, 1985, p 81-82).

In the Irish context, the positive aspects of open adoption should be valued while at the same time acknowledging that some birth mothers still conceal their pregnancies from family and friends. O’Carroll, (2002) shows that even when pregnancies are concealed, birth parents sometimes wish to have an open adoption arrangement.

### 6.4.8 Reclaim of Child by her Birth Mother

This is an area that is most pertinent in stranger adoption, although issues of uncertainty also need to be addressed in step-parent and foster care adoptions. The social worker needs to discuss this issue with applicants during the assessment. Probably the biggest, although not always acknowledged fear of adopters is that the birth mother will reclaim her child. Dominick (1988, p 79 – 80) found that the feelings of insecurity about the birth mother changing her mind were more acute for adoptive fathers and those adopting for the first time. For the adopters “either they must close their mind to the risk or keep themselves to some extent uncommitted” (Rowe, 1996, p 249).
If the adopters fears are realised, the suggestion is that the “child’s association with the prospective adoptive parents should terminate as quickly as possible” (Report of the Review Committee on Adoption Services, 1984, p 75). However, even if the adoptive parents surrender the child as requested, they are doubtless “grief-stricken, depressed and possibly ashamed at having given up without a fight” (Schwartz, 1984, p 54).

Agencies need to keep in mind:

- The social worker’s personal feelings are part of the situation and she will need support at this time so that her concern and anxiety do not further distress the adopters.
- The need for the baby to become re-acquainted with her birth mother is very important. The birth mother should have a separate social worker.
- The social worker and agency have to remember the rights of the birth mother and present a picture of her to the adopters that is as reassuring as possible. It may be more tolerable for them if they can feel she is reclaiming her child out of love for her and has adequate supports to care for her.
- Following a reclaiming, the social worker has a role in helping the couple mourn their loss as well as encouraging them to deal with feelings of anger towards the birth mother and the agency.
- In the event of a reclaiming being contested legally by the adoptive parents, the aftermath of the court proceedings will need considerable attention, whatever the outcome. The social worker in this situation needs to be aware of how a contested adoption may leave residual feelings of anger and guilt on the part of the adoptive parents, interfere with their sense of ‘entitlement’ to the child and add difficult and complex aspects to the future task of telling about adoption.

Reclaim when a child already in the care of the applicants at the time of application is uncommon, as the application would not be proceeding unless consents to adoption were positive. If step-parent adoption applications are suspended because of birth father consultation, the day to day-living arrangements of the child are unlikely to change hugely.

In the case of relatives, reclaim could happen if the child was placed privately and the adoption application was being used to mediate a custody battle. This would be less likely to happen if the child was already in the care of health board prior to the adoption application.

Likewise for the foster carer reclaim may occur but again the care status of the child and the extent to which adoption forms part of the care plan are crucial issues. In foster care adoption applications, the voluntary consent of birth mother may be withdrawn but the day-to-day living arrangements for the child may remain.

For applicants involved in ICA, reclaim is unlikely unless issues of invalid consents arise. If the consents are invalid, it does not follow that reclaim will occur. A number of routes are possible such as obtaining proper consents and/ or establish if grounds exist for the Adoption Board to set aside issue of consents.
6.4.9 Infertility

This will be especially relevant for those couples in the stranger strand applying to adopt a non-relative baby, but may also be part of the underlying motivation to foster or may form part of the history in step parent or family adoptions. Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, the social worker may choose to wait until she knows the applicants a little, before talking to them about it. However, because it is usually bound up so closely with the story of what led them to consider adoption, it may come up naturally at an early stage of the assessment. The social worker needs to keep the following in mind:

- Infertility is a life crisis for those who find themselves involuntarily childless. Raphael-Leff (1991, p30) highlights the psychological toll involved when she says “the prolonged failure to conceive arouses self doubts, erodes the couple’s sexual and emotional resources ….and poses a threat to each partner’s personal and gender identity and to their mutual future legacy.”

- Infertility does not constitute a single potential loss but rather a number of losses. Thus one partner might experience the loss of potential parenting most deeply while the other partner mourns the loss of genetic continuity.

- The mode of resolution of infertility can have “important implications for future management of the special tasks of the adoptive family” (Brebner et al, 1985, p 67) as the anxiety generated by the crisis of infertility can be communicated to the child, adversely affecting adjustment (Feigelman and Silverman, 1983, p 80).

- The feelings experienced by the infertile couple are similar to those in a bereavement. Current thinking suggests this is a life-long issue – which may be initiated at many junctures. This is different from the previous idea that it was a sequential process leading to resolution. This way of thinking helps to “normalise” grief as part of holding something that becomes part of us. However, grieving may be unsuccessful because the loss is potential rather than actual, and may be socially negated with remarks of others that infertility will not kill them, or wounding insinuations that the absence of children is from choice. The social worker in adoption then needs to listen to how the couple have redefined their lives and moved on to acceptance of loss and whether they had the presence of empathic others to help sort out the unique meaning of that loss.

- The social worker needs to help the couple acknowledge and articulate their feelings and realise that “they may never come to terms fully with childlessness and that their feelings about it will probably be revived at various times in their lives” (BAAF, 1983)

- For many, the bid to adopt follows years of infertility treatment. Decisions about jobs, house buying, study and other options regarding parenting such as adoption will have been postponed by the couple whose lives will have revolved around infertility treatments such as IVF (Strickler, 1992). The demands of the medical treatment itself may result in psychological distress for some participants in the assisted reproductive technology (Greenfield, 1997). For couples with unexplained infertility, knowing when to stop treatment is particularly difficult (Seibel, 1992). Couples
whose treatment with IVF is unsuccessful can be at risk of depression (Golombok, 1992, p210). Yet for those who fail at IVF, a large number would consider further participation in new reproductive options (Leiblum et al, 1987).

- The social worker in adoption needs to have an understanding of all these issues if she is to build a rapport with the couple, and hear their story of their fantasy child who is psychologically present but physically absent. This is important because mourning the loss of this fantasy child will enable the couple move on to the possibility of parenting a child born to someone else (Wheeler, 1998).

6.5 Proposed Interview Schedule where there is no Pre-existing Relationship

The following sections contain a suggested outline of interviews and topics to be covered as an aid for practitioners coming new to adoption. The social worker should approach the content in a flexible manner to suit her individual style of interviewing and to allow the applicants some control over the telling of their story.

6.5.1 First Interview with Applicants

- Discuss how applicants found the preparation course.
- What have they learned about the adoption process and are there areas they need clarified?
- Did the preparation course raise particular issues of concern? If so these need to be addressed now.
- Invite the applicants to talk about what led them to this point of applying to adopt. The preparation for this part of the interview requires the social worker to have a good working knowledge of the issues associated with each strand of domestic adoption. If the interview is with childless applicants applying for adoption of a baby, the focus will likely be on the applicants’ story of their efforts to have a child of their own, and the worker needs to have an understanding of the physical, psychological and emotional components associated with infertility treatment.
- Give applicants an up to date picture of the availability of children for adoption through your agency. How long might they wait for a placement?
- Is there an option to be jointly assessed for a domestic and an inter-country adoption?
- If so, what are the agency’s conditions around waiting lists for placements?
- At what age will the applicants be removed from the waiting list for domestic adoption, if no placement has been made?

This interview (and subsequent ones) should conclude with time spent summarising and clarifying what has been discussed. One of the objectives of this first interview is to engender a sense of openness and trust between the worker and applicants, upon which further interviews can be built.
6.5.2 Second and Third Interviews

These interviews are individual ones with husband and wife. Some of the output from the preparation course such as genograms, ecomaps and loss charts should have been prepared by the applicants and given to the worker in advance of these interviews. Areas to be discussed are:

- Family background and experience of being parented;
- Education and work life;
- Experience of relationships;
- Meeting their partner and the development of that relationship;
- Infertility (if that is relevant) and any other health issues;
- Religion/philosophy of life;
- Personality and how that has helped or hindered in dealing with life events;
- Social and family network;
- Financial demands and financial stress;
- Substance use/addiction problems (current/past);
- Mental health needs?
- Experience of being an adult victim, and what supports availed of?
- Insight into actions and how they might impact on child;
- General strengths/stresses in relation to proposed adoption.
- Individual motivation to adopt

The purpose of discussing these areas with applicants is not to amass unrelated biographical details but to listen to their life stories to date, with a view to reflecting on how their experiences have impinged on their present attitudes, beliefs, hopes and expectations and how their life experience may impact on rearing an adoptive child. As with all information, if this is used to provide evidence on a particular issue, it is important that alternative explanations are also considered/ reflected upon.

6.5.3 Fourth Interview

The aim of this interview is to talk to the applicants about their marriage, because marriage stability is seen as a cornerstone of good child-rearing. In the case of an individual applicant, the person’s relationships past and present as they relate to the adoption should be discussed. Discussion where applicants are married should include the following areas:

- What makes marriage stable and satisfying for both partners;
- Highlights of the marriage;
- Low points of the marriage and how they coped;
- Communication between the partners;
- Power balances and how these are negotiated;
- Roles, and are they flexible or fixed?
- What will change if they adopt a child?
- Motivation to adopt and how this has been negotiated between them? (It is usual for applicants to be at different stages in relation to this issue.)

Marriage stability in respect of step-parent adoption is also crucial as the making of adoption order means that the legal status of the child to birth father changes.
Therefore, it is important to consider as far as it is feasible if the proposed adoption is into a secure/stable marriage.

6.5.4 Fifth Interview

This interview focuses on the applicants’ experience of children. If there are already children in the family, they should be included in a part of the interview. General issues to be addressed in this interview:

- What (if any) are the applicants’ experiences with children?
- What is the applicants’ attitude to discipline?
- General views or philosophy of child rearing?
- The applicants’ expectations of the adopted child?
- The applicants’ feeling about background factors in the child for adoption
- The extra dimension of adoption and their understanding of this. Reference may be made to the preparation group where issues of loss, telling about adoption and the child’s birth family were explored.
- If the applicants already have children what are the significant relationships and how will the arrival of another child impinge on those relationships?

Again, these issues need to be linked to capacity to understand child development issues, identity and adoption, family life cycle issues, and the need to be able to network and initiate support for child into the future.

Where children are interviewed, the child’s age and understanding of adoption will determine the conversations. Workers may draw on the array of creative ways of working with children. The following should be considered:

- Knowledge of parents’ application;
- Views on having siblings;
- What would they expect to be different;

6.5.5 Sixth Interview

At this stage both social worker and applicants should have a good idea as to whether adoption is the right way forward and so discussion should now centre on discussion of:

- Medical Issues
- Transracial Adoption
- Matching and placement
- Meeting with the birth parents
- Adoption with or without contact
- Practicalities of open adoption (following on consideration/ reflection on this aspect in preparation etc) and maintaining meaningful links for the child
- Post-adoption concerns, such as attachment and bonding, the continuing role of the agency and difficult subjects, such as the birth mother wishing to reclaim her baby.
6.5.6 Additional Interviews

There may be need for additional interviews in order for the social worker to complete a comprehensive picture of the applicants, their strengths and needs and to ensure that the applicants have had time to consider the various and complex dimensions of adoption. If additional interviews are proposed the social worker needs to explain clearly to the applicants why this is so.

6.5.7 Working with Applicants towards a Recommendations

The applicants should have been clear from outset of the process the capacities which the agency requires to ensure that adoptive children are given the very best opportunity in the families they are placed with.

The capacities are described in Section 3.3, and the worker should be satisfied that the strengths, stresses and supports that are present in the prospective adoptive family are clearly enunciated.

The report should conclude with an unequivocal recommendation, setting out the type of resource that the family offers.

6.6 Proposed Interview Schedule where there is a Pre-existing Relationship

The following sections contain suggestions for topics to be covered. It is recognised that in foster care adoptions, the agency will already have a great deal of information about the applicants from their initial fostering assessment and so the emphasis is on the transition from foster parent to adoptive parent.

In the case of adoption under Irish law of children adopted overseas, the applicants will already have completed the assessment process and so the interview schedule can be adjusted to one or two interviews with a focus on the applicants’ experience of meeting and getting to know their adopted child.

6.6.1 First Interview with Applicants

- Discuss how applicants found the preparation course.
- What have they learned about the adoption process and are there areas they need clarified?
- Did the preparation course raise particular issues of concern? If so these need to be addressed now.
- Invite the applicants to talk about what led them to this point of applying to adopt. The preparation for this part of the interview requires the social worker to have a good working knowledge of the issues associated with each strand of domestic adoption where a pre-existing relationship exists.
- Is it clear that the application is in respect of a named child, and is not a general home study appraisal?
• Discuss the child’s life to date, and how the decision to apply for the child to be adopted has evolved;
• Explore the child/adopter relationship;
• Consider what the child knows about adoption, its own origins, and relationships with its birth parents/birth families;
• In the case of a step parent, relative or foster carer, explore child’s care history to date, the history of the relationship between child and parent/s and child and prospective adopters;
• In a step-parent adoption, complex questions about the child’s relationship with her birth father and also her step-father and the child’s knowledge of her birth circumstances need to be discussed. It is likely that the social worker will need to give additional advice and help in the area of disclosure about the child’s origins.
• In the case of relatives adopting, the circumstances of the placement and the extent to which it was a private arrangement within the family or organised as part of care proceedings is important to explore;
• In the case of the child who has been in the care system, the views of the agency in respect of proposed adoption needs to be established and discussed. In case of a difference in views as to the timing or decision to apply to adopt, the consequences for all involved needs to be established.

This interview (and subsequent ones) should conclude with time spent summarising and clarifying what has been discussed. An objective of this first interview is to engender a sense of openness and trust between the worker and applicants upon which further interviews can be built.

6.6.2 Second Interviews

The focus in this interview should be on the nature of the child/adopter relationship. Issues such as the following should be discussed:
• What, if any, are the applicants’ experiences with children?
• Parenting capacity
• General views or philosophy of child rearing?
• The extra dimension of adoption and their understanding of this. Reference may be made to the preparation group where issues of loss, telling about adoption and the child’s birth family were explored.
• The applicants’ expectations of the adopted child?
• Adopter/Child interaction
• Understanding child development, understanding of child and acceptance of who they are;
• Outline of routine daily needs of child and are routines age appropriate?
• Bonding with child and child’s attachment to adopters
• Communication with child, and child’s communication with adopters
• Attitude to discipline, and appropriateness and consistency of discipline used
• Child development and stimulation
• Use of appropriate play areas?
• Are learning experiences provided for?
• Do applicants show the ability and time for child’s play?
• What supports will they need to meet the child’s needs over time?
6.6.3 Third and Fourth Interviews
These interviews are individual ones with the husband and wife, or with the individual in case of a single applicant. Areas which should be discussed include:

- Family background and experience of being parented
- School and work life
- Experience of relationships
- Meeting their partner and the development of that relationship
- Infertility (if that is relevant) and any other health issues
- Religion and philosophy of life
- Personality and how that has helped or hindered in dealing with life events.
- Social and family network
- Financial demands and financial stress
- Substance use/ addiction problems (current/ past)
- Mental health needs?
- Experience of being an adult victim, and what supports availed of?
- Insight into actions and how they might impact on child;
- General strengths/ stresses in relation to proposed adoption.

The purpose of discussing these areas with applicants is not to amass unrelated biographical details but to listen to their life stories to date, with a view to reflecting on how their experiences have impinged on their present attitudes, beliefs, hopes and expectations. In the case of foster care adoptions a great deal will already have been covered in the applicants assessment for fostering, and this needs to be acknowledged and factored into the interviews.

6.6.4 Fifth Interview
The aim of this interview is to talk to the applicants about their marriage because marriage stability is seen as a cornerstone of good child-rearing. Discussion will include these areas:

- What makes marriage stable and satisfying for both partners
- Highlights of the marriage
- Low points of the marriage and how they coped
- Communication between the partners
- Roles, and are they flexible or fixed?
- What will change if they adopt this child?
- Motivation to adopt

6.6.5 Sixth Interview
If there are already children in the family, they should be included in a part of the interview. It is necessary to have an individual discussion with the child for whom adoption is proposed, in addition to meeting other children in the family. It is likely that the needs of the child will determine the amount of work. The sequencing of talking with the children is important, and this needs to be negotiated very carefully with the parents, especially in cases of step-parent adoption.
This will be important in step-parent adoptions where “prior to the finalisation of the order, children over seven years old at the time of application are generally consulted alone in their family home, by the visiting social worker, and their views and the extent of their knowledge are ascertained at this point” (Loftus, 2002, p 67). This will also be true in the adoption of foster children, many of whom will be old enough to be consulted on their views of the proposed adoption. Talking to the child and other children as to the proposed adoption should consider:

- If the child is already in the care system, as will be the case in foster care and some relative cases, then a lot of information will already be known about the child’s wishes etc;
- Establish child’s view and understanding of adoption;
- Knowledge of origins and relationships with birth parents and extended family;
- What will remain the same and what will be different following adoption?
- Birth family’s reactions to adoption, and their wish for ongoing contact. This needs to be done very sensitively, as it may not be possible to organise.

### 6.6.6 Seventh Interview

At this stage both social worker, applicants and child should have a good idea as to whether adoption is the right way forward. The worker should give the draft report on the process so far to the applicants before this interview, and so discussion should now centre on:

- Open adoption arrangements;
- Post adoption concerns;
- Any outstanding issues
- The draft report.

### 6.6.7 Additional Interviews

There may be need for additional interviews in order that the social worker can finalise the comprehensive picture of the applicants, their strengths and needs, or so that the applicants have time to consider the various and complex dimensions of adoption.

Adoption in respect of foster care and relatives is indicated when

- The child is legally available for adoption or grounds exist to make a relevant application to court;
- The plans for reunification have been tried and failed;
- It is the child’s best interests;
- The family is committed to the child, and there is a strong attachment both ways;
- There are strong, caring feelings from applicants to the child, irrespective of behavior;
- The family have the capacity to meet the child’s needs and give continuity over an extended time-scale;
PART VII - MATCHING AND CONTACT IN DOMESTIC ADOPTION

7.1 Matching Children With Adoptive Parents
While matching is not a component of the actual assessment, it is considered here in relation to the applicants’ expectations of the child to be placed with them. Like other areas of adoption, there are ambiguities surrounding the precise meaning of the term matching. In the past it has included matching of child and parents in terms of intellectual potential, physical appearance and personality and temperament. More recently references to matching in the international literature have concentrated more on racial matching reflecting current trends in inter-country adoption, or to discussion with applicants about their ability to tolerate specific behaviours in the case of older or special needs children (Triseliotis, Shireman and Hurdleby, 1997, p 156). As the profile of Irish children for whom adoptive homes are sought changes, the complexity of the issues associated with matching will become more a feature of practice.

Irish research (Conway, 2000, p 198) showed that in the 1980’s, matching the social class and the educational background of the birth mother and the adoptive parents were the factors considered most important when selecting a family for a baby. These factors may still feature in agency policy and practice. However, recent trends towards more open adoption practice mean that the birth mother herself plays a significant role in matching the child and family. Many agencies will attempt to accommodate her wishes in respect of the age of the adoptive parents, the child’s ordinal position in the family, a rural or urban family placement and educational opportunities for her child. The birth mother will sometimes be offered written profiles of prospective adoptive families to choose between. Policies in this regard vary with some agencies offering one profile at a time for consideration, while others offer a choice of three families. Just as with the adoptive applicants, agencies need to make their policies clear to the birth mother early in the counselling process. They also need to be aware that:

- Use of profiles of adopters allow the birth mother to exercise choice for her baby but also presents dilemmas concerning the best person to write the profile, how negative material should be handled, how to avoid passing social work responsibility for rejecting an applicant from social worker to birth mother and most importantly how to keep the child’s interest as a clearly expressed priority (Fish and Speirs, 1990).
- As well as meeting the wishes of the birth mother, the agency should also take account of the needs of the child and the adoptive parents hopes and expectations. The match should provide some congruence between the dream child of the adopters and the reality of their adopted child and provide a significant link of racial, cultural and social origins between the child and her adoptive parents.

7.2 Principles for Matching
The following are considered as important principles for practitioners and agencies in their respective roles of proposing and approving matches of children with adoptive parents.
- The objective is to match children with adoptive parents to secure best possible developmental outcomes for children over the course of their childhood and into adulthood
- The need to look at child’s needs holistically. No one set of needs should be privileged over the other sets of needs, which could result in delays or no placement at all
- The child’s ethnic origin, culture, language and religion are significant factors to be taken into account when adoption agencies are considering the most appropriate placement for a child.
- The needs of sibling groups should be considered

### 7.3 Issues to Consider in Matching Decisions

Most of the following issues will have been covered with applicants during the assessment. The agency now needs to consider these issues again in relation to matching child and family.

- Will the placement meet the developmental needs of the child over the course of their childhood and beyond?
- What are the child’s views (where the child is of an appropriate age and level of understanding) of what the proposed placement has to offer them?
- Do the prospective adopters have the parenting capacity to meet the developmental needs of the child?
- Do the prospective adopters have the parenting capacity to take on board the child’s particular life story?
- Do the prospective adopters have the developmental capacity to continue to meet the child’s needs over time?
- What support will the adoptive parents need to help them develop this capacity?
- What are the birth parent/s wishes in relation to the child’s placement?
- What aspects from the assessment report needs to be compiled to share with the birth parents?

### 7.4 Planning And Managing Contact

The importance of open adoption and ongoing contact was discussed in earlier Sections. For many adopted children maintaining contact with birth parents/ past carers and siblings is a significant issue. Contact can help the child to maintain a link with their past by providing information about family members and their well-being. It can be important for the child’s identity. On the other hand contact can be unsettling and even disturbing.

Although it is not possible to attach conditions relating to issues such as contact to Adoption Orders, it is recognised as an essential part of successful adoption. It is important that issues relating to plans and decisions about contact are provided for at the decision-making stage. The over-riding consideration in issues of contact between the child and birth parents and birth families should be the child’s needs, wishes and feelings, and their welfare and safety. A mediation service should be considered which would be available to all parties in the adoption.
A plan for contact arrangements should be drawn up by the agency, to meet the child’s needs. Where an existing contact arrangement exists, this should be reviewed and updated (bearing in mind the objective may have been different eg to support rehabilitation or reunification) to reflect and take account of the proposed adoption. The new contact plan should set out:

- who should have contact with the child
- the timing of such contact
- the place of contact
- the nature of the contact

As the child develops, their needs change, and so may their need for contact. Agencies should ensure that a periodic review of contact arrangements is undertaken with the child and families.

Some of the indicators for making decisions about contact issues are as follows:

- What lessons can be taken from an existing contact plan about the important relationships the child has?
- Do these relationships need to be protected and sustained to meet the child’s needs? (Or has the child’s age and stage of development changed the answer to this question?)
- What is the child’s view of maintaining contact with each person?
- What are the views of the birth parent/s, birth family and significant individuals about maintaining contact?
- Is direct contact appropriate for the child’s needs?
- What form that direct contact should take, the frequency and where it should take place, - telephone calls, meetings?
- Would indirect contact meet the child’s needs?
- What form the indirect contact should take (eg through an intermediary letterbox arrangement) and the frequency – letters, photographs, e-mail?
- What practical and emotional support will be needed to sustain contact arrangements?

Agencies should explain the contact arrangements clearly to the child and discuss this with them. They should also explain and discuss the arrangements with the birth parents or others involved.

Contact issues are also important from the prospective adopters view, and should be taken into account in the matching stage.
PART VIII – THE FINAL STAGES

8.1 The Report

8.1.1 Purpose of the Assessment Report

A written report should be prepared by the assessing social worker at the end of the assessment to provide the basis for decision-making as to the suitability of the applicants.

8.1.2 Format of the Report

The report itself should be a balance of information and analysis leading to a conclusion and recommendation. It is the analysis, feeding into the professional judgement, based on the discussions with the applicants that is of crucial importance to the decision-makers. The report should not be overly descriptive and contain facts alone. Describing a person’s childhood does not necessarily give an idea of what that is about, unless it is then analysed according to what it may contribute to the applicants’ capacity as adoptive parents.

The decision-makers need a certain style of report, which facilitates them to assess the suitability of the applicant. They also need a clear recommendation, with supporting analysis to make a decision.

It is suggested therefore that, to facilitate local decision-making, there should be a separation of descriptive and analytical parts of the report. The headings of the report would follow the format of the subjects covered in the interviews.

A good report should have the following characteristics:

- More analytical, rather than a purely descriptive account
- Thoroughness, not to be confused with including all details
- All headings explored and documented
- Issues identified, followed and concluded
- Evidence that process followed
- Balance
- Clearly argued recommendation
- Be presented well, under main headings, avoiding too many sub-headings

In the case of the ICA strand, a full report of the type discussed below would not be considered necessary, but an addendum type report, building on what is already on file would suffice.

8.1.3 Information Analysis leading to Professional Judgement.

The worker requires a good level of skill in sifting the information coming forward. Analysis and insight can arise during the session, or can emerge on reflection of what has transpired. The significance is not so much in the information itself, but in what this contributes to the conclusion about the applicants. It is important that the analysis
is done during and in the immediate aftermath of the interview, so that issues which may need to be followed up can be identified, and a plan made to take it to conclusion. The worker should make notes of points which occur during conversations. Patterns should be identified, and confirmed as the process develops.

It may also be helpful to reflect on applicants with colleagues and the supervisor. Notes of analysis should be made at the same time that the information from the interviews is being recorded (see file keeping).

Things that can assist in analysis include:

- a systemic approach
- recording important issues
- reflective conversations with peers and supervisors
- use of Genograms to map relationships and processes

### 8.1.4 Compiling the Final Report

In compiling the report the worker will have access to the information available from the application and initial assessment stage (including referees report), the report prepared to address the question if the proposed adoption is in the best interests of the child, as well as material from the assessment/home study. The conclusion that is arrived at should generally be developed as the assessment process goes on, so that hypothesis can be confirmed before the assessment process is over. When the analysis is done, writing the final report should be a straight-forward piece of work, working from the conclusion that the applicants are either going to be recommended or not. Writing the report should not be confused with decision-making. It is the recording of the decision, and the process and basis for the conclusion. Any relevant descriptive or evidential pieces should have been compiled on a contemporary basis during the assessment. (See also record keeping) The final report is a pulling together into a conclusion of all the elements covered during the assessment. It is recommended that:

- The report should not compare people to a single “ideal standard”, and should recognise diversity in people and value and respect positive qualities/strengths of applicants in parenting an adopted child.

- The key aspect is that information gathered needs to be understood and analysed in relation to applicants’ willingness and ability to parent an adopted child.

- In determining suitability what is important is the consideration of the capacity of the prospective adopters to look after the child in a safe and responsible way that meets the child’s developmental needs.

- The worker needs to state the basis (eg personal observation, information shared by applicants, comment from referee) of key findings which contribute to conclusions.

- The worker needs to show that key reflections/insights have been mirrored back to applicants for clarification/agreement. Reservations should be recorded and worked to a conclusion.
• The justification for the recommendation has to be explicit. The reasons the worker thinks the applicants are/ are not suitable has to be clear, argued out and based on available information.

It is recommended that the final report should be compiled within four weeks of the completion of the assessment.

8.1.5 Headings for the Final Report

The format of the final report should largely synthesise the areas that have featured in the preparation and assessment process.

The BAAF Form F is used extensively by adoption agencies and is recommended as a template to be applied to stranger adoption. In 8.1.5.2 a template for reporting on situations where there is a pre-existing relationship is proposed.

8.1.5.1 Where No Pre-Existing Relationship Exists

The suggested headings where there is no pre-existing relationship include:

• Basic biographical details of the applicants
• Application type and background to the application
• Summary of Initial Assessment conclusions on suitability
• Applicants participation in preparation process
• Infertility issues
• Motivation of the applicants
• Contribution of applicants’ background (childhood, education, occupation, current family relationships, social networks, personality and interests, religion/ philosophy) to capacity to parent adopted child
• Marital relationship
• Conclusions from parenting/ experience with children
• Applicants’ views on background factors in child, and their expectations of child
• Applicants’ views on child’s birth family and post adoption contact
• Applicants’ views on telling about adoption and level of openness
• Suitability of match and placement
• Development of conclusion re applicants, including input of referees.
• Recommendation

8.1.5.2 Where a Pre-Existing Relationship is Present

The objective is to highlight strengths and concerns under each heading, and relate the topic specifically to the child in respect of whom the adoption application is made. In the case of foster care adoptions, in addition to the Final Report on the applicants the child’s social worker should complete the BAAF 2000 Form F on the child.

In the case of children recently adopted overseas, an addendum type report should suffice given that the applicants will already have completed an assessment and a comprehensive report will already be available. This addendum report should include:
- Applicants’ experience of visiting the country and culture of their adopted child
- What was their first meeting with the child like? Did they meet his/her birth parents and/or extended family?
- Were there particular joys and sorrows associated with their adoption experience abroad?
- How has their child settled in to his/her new home?
- Are there particular issues relating to the child’s physical and psychological well-being? Do the applicants need additional supports in these areas?
- What (if applicable) has been the reaction of siblings as well as extended family and their community?

**Child’s needs and background situation**
Biographical data of child and birth family
Child’s view of proposed adoption
Educational, health, social and psychological appraisal i.e. where is the child at this point in time.
Contact arrangements
Other key background information that needs to be taken into account.

**Composition of Adoptive Family** (Genogram should be attached)

**Summary Recommendation based on Eligibility and Suitability Criteria**

**Reasons for Adoption Application**

**Individual Biographical Profile of Applicants**
Experience of childhood as it relates to parenting the child now. This should be linked with loss and separation and attachment especially in child’s life to date;
Family history (use genogram to illustrate);
Capacity (including health) to meet needs of child over time;
Work history;
Financial demands and financial stress;
Substance use/Addiction problems (current/past);
Mental health needs;
Experience of being an adult victim and what supports availed of (if relevant)?
Criminal involvement (past and current?)
Insight into actions and how they might impact on child;
General strengths in relation to proposed adoption.

**Adopter/Child interaction**
Focus particularly on appropriate communication, bonding/attachment and discipline;
   Understanding child’s development;
   Understanding of child and acceptance of who they are;
   Are daily routine needs of child met appropriately?
   Bonding with child and child’s attachment to adopters;
   Communication with child, and child’s communication with adopters;
   Use of physical discipline;
Appropriateness of discipline used;
Consistency of discipline.

Child development stimulation
Are there appropriate play areas?
Are learning experiences provided for?
Do applicants show the ability and time for child’s play?

Environment
Is there physical space for child?
Proposed sleeping arrangements?
Level of cleanliness?
Safe environment external and internal?

Existing Children in Family
Outline history of relationship between other children in family and child;
Ordinal position of children;
If other children in family, do applicants have ability to manage sibling interaction;
Areas of stresses and strengths

Interaction between Adults Involved
Birth parents views of placement, and extent of relationship between adopters and birth parent/s prior to adoption;
Adopters’ willingness to co-operate with birth parents to ensure child’s needs are met if contact to occur post-adoption;
Problem solving abilities and level of insight into how adult relationship impacts on child;
Adopters’ views of birth parents – are child’s identity issues safeguarded?

Marital Relationship
Brief history of relationship;
Balance of power between applicants;
Adults’ attitude towards each another - respectful, supportive, abusive....
Ability to communicate – verbal/ non-verbal

Availability of Supports
Support within family, extended family/ community support?
Substitute child care arrangement when required?
Ability to use agency services for child, if required?
Ability to ask for help and ability to maintain relationships

Conclusion and Recommendation
These are based on the best interests of child, and general suitability of adopters. Conclusion summarises their strengths, stresses and support issues.
8.1.6 Sharing Contents with Applicants

It is recommended that applicants should be facilitated to be fully aware of what is written about them. The self-selection approach recommended should ensure that this is discussed with the applicants throughout the assessment process, so there are no surprises at the end.

It is considered essential for the whole process to be transparent to the applicant, and therefore sharing of the report is considered vital. Good practice in this regard requires workers to share the contents of the report, reading it through and discussing any differences of opinion, recording and logging these very carefully. These should be included with the report, so that the Adoption Committee can take these aspects into consideration as well.

Applicants should be given a full opportunity to review the contents of the report, and to raise issues with which they do not concur. These should be considered by the worker, and if agreed the report should be amended. If there is not agreement, after mediation by the supervisor, the applicants should be afforded an opportunity to provide written comment on the matters in dispute and this should be submitted with the report to the Adoption committee for consideration.

8.2 Decision-Making

8.2.1 Introduction

The adoption process places a heavy responsibility on agencies, their social workers and decision-makers. Their work and decisions can profoundly affect the lives of those involved in adoption. It is important therefore that the decision-making process is soundly constructed, with appropriate delegation of responsibility, with balances and checks, and appeals systems as necessary.

The key agency decisions include:

- Is adoption in the best interests of the child?
- Do prospective adopters have the capacity to become adoptive parents?
- Is there a match between the needs of the particular child and the capacity of the family?
- Do the prospective adopters meet the requirement of Sect 13 of the 1952 Act?
- Have the birth parents wishes been adequately catered for?

While social workers and their immediate supervisors are in the front line of making recommendations on the above questions, currently the State relies on the “Adoption Board” – a group of persons from a variety of backgrounds operating in a quasi-judicial setting - to be the final arbiters and decision makers in this sphere.

As noted earlier, the Domestic Adoption sub-group have recommended that this function should transfer to the health boards (or the new HSE configuration expected later in 2004). Health boards and adoption agencies have traditionally also relied on a group, generally known as a “Placement Committee” to advise the CEO, in whom powers in relation to fostering and adoption were vested, on decisions to be made.
8.2.2 Adoption Committees

It is proposed that this approach to decision-making should be preserved as a balance to a professional only decision-making model. This section of the document provides guidance on the operation of the group to advise the legally vested decision-makers in the new agencies. The title of this type of group has varied, being “case committee” formerly and “placement committee” in more recent years. In the UK the title used is the “Adoption Panel”. It is suggested that the phrase “Adoption Committee” should be used in future, as the role is broader than the traditional title “placement” would imply.

The recommended roles for Adoption Committees is to

- Advise on agency policy, procedures and practice in relation to adoption issues, and be consulted on the drawing up and reviewing these periodically.
- To provide recommendations to the legally designated agency decision-maker on all aspects of adoption cases including
  - if adoption is in the best interests of a particular child,
  - if prospective adopters have the capacity to parent an adopted child, and
  - on matching of children with families
- To monitor and review agency policy and practice in relation to adoption
- To offer consultation services to agency workers in respect of individual cases

It needs to be understood clearly that the Adoption Committee is an aid to and not a substitute for the decision-making of the agency. Care should be taken that the system is not the cause of undue delay in decision-making (eg approving matches) Where they operate well the Committee system can enhance the quality of decision-making in adoption agencies. The Adoption Committee will primarily consider and work on the social work recommendations on cases, bearing in mind the issues discussed for considering “best interests”, “suitability of applicants”, and “matching” decisions. The designation of powers within agencies e.g. by CEO will determine the final decision-making process.

8.2.3 Composition and Operation of Adoption Committees

It is considered imperative that Adoption Committees should be multi-disciplinary and should receive training for their role. It is suggested that the following principles should govern the composition and operation of Adoption Committees

- Adoption committees should be large enough to allow balanced views and debate, but need to be sized to ensure that they have a membership which can meet often enough and for sufficient duration to deal with the caseload. Given that adoption deals with the lives of children, it is critical that Adoption Committees do not become points of delay along the decision-making process, although in the case of four of the five strands of domestic adoption, where there is a pre-existing relationship delay would not be expected to impact on the child’s life. However, in this regard, it is proposed that an Adoption Committee should aim to consider and decide a recommendation within one month of receiving the file/ social work recommendation.
The Adoption Committee should have a competent chair to ensure that business is transacted in a proper and prompt manner, and that appropriate and ethical considerations are applied to the work of the Committee.

Adoption committees should contain appropriate expertise to allow informed recommendations to be made.

Adoption committees should be drawn from the community they serve, including ‘non-expert’ persons. However, it needs to be clear that persons acting on a committee are not representing ‘clients’.

Adoption committees need to review their own performance, and there is a need to ensure a common approach and consistency between different Adoption Committees. (It is considered this latter role should be a function of the proposed Adoption Authority)

Adoption Committees will need to be serviced by the agency, to be provided with case papers, reports and social work recommendations in advance of meetings, and to have agency professional and administrative attendance to enable them to function.

Agencies need to consider if members of committees should be remunerated for their time, and also receive expenses in connection with their work on committees.

Adoption Committees should be subject to any guidance from the (proposed) Adoption Authority on the issues and manner of consideration of cases, and on type and content of conditions to be attached to recommendations. The recommendations should generally be in a standard format.

Given the above considerations the following are recommended as parameters for Adoption Committees.

There should be at least eight members, but not more than ten. The quorum for a meeting should be five members, including the nominated chair or vice-chair and a social worker who is a member of the agency staff.

A balance of men and women, with at least one man and one woman.

A chair and vice-chair

Two social work staff employed by the agency

An employee of the agency representing the decision-making manager

The agency medical adviser on adoption

Two persons who are independent of the agency, including where practical an adoptive parent, an adopted person aged over 18 years, and/or a birth parent. Other suitable persons could include teachers, parents, solicitors etc.

Two members of staff from other disciplines in the agency eg public health nurses, psychologists.

Membership under the “independent” category will be determined by the agency. In smaller agencies, they may wish to nominate other professional people who are independent of the agency. In the case of a health board, it is likely they will nominate people from multi-disciplinary backgrounds including staff from other disciplines, while independent people may be made up more from user groups etc.
It is recommended that Committee members should be appointed for three-year terms with not more than two consecutive terms. Transitional arrangements should be built in to maintain expertise.

8.2.4 Managing the Adoption Committee

The task of managing the Adoption Committee should reside with the delegated adoption service manager within the agency. He/ she should ensure that Committee members are inducted and prepared for their role, and issued with an information pack, detailing the role and method of working of the Committee, the terms and conditions under which they operate, the manner in which they should approach their tasks and issues they should consider. It is intended that this “Guide for Practitioners” should be part of this briefing material.

The delegated agency manager should monitor the functioning and performance of the Committee, such as if the members are able to give the commitment required, if “subs” are needed, and that the professional attendance (social work, medical and management/ administrative) and support are available. The agency manager also needs to consider the time factor, which can be an issue where agencies normally wait to have a number of cases built up before convening a meeting. The delay in getting unrelated children in adoptive homes is a concern currently. Streamlining decision-making is vital as time lost early in a child’s life in the adoptive home can never be replaced.

It is recommended that each agency which has an Adoption Committee should include a summary report of its activities with its annual report. This would include summary information on the

- Activities and recommendations under each sub-category of domestic adoption dealing with the children and the prospective adopters, the matches made and the adoptions made during the period.

8.3 Records and File-keeping

It is considered important that there is a complete record of the adoption process, from the initial enquiry to the final declaration being made. The area of file-keeping and recording of information requires attention. Clarity of purpose is needed in determining the format of files and to get the balance between recording material which should be retained on file, and that which can be discarded.

It is recommended that this information should be in two formats. The first is a summary sheet, such as that contained on the inside of a file cover, which records factual information such as key dates of enquiry, correspondence, applications, preparations courses, the assessment, meetings re the report and the decision-making. In this way the history of the application can be seen at a glance. This purpose of such a summary record is to enable supervisors and managers to ensure that the organisation is meeting its targets for quality services. Such a summary record will also facilitate extraction of data, to enable the relevant management information to be compiled.
The actual file itself should contain all records of the agency’s dealing with the applicants. The file may be divided into parts, to reflect the stages in the adoption process.

Storing of correspondence and letters on file is a straightforward task. To record phone conversations, it is recommended that each worker in an agency uses a standard telephone contact record sheet, where the incoming and outgoing phone contacts relating to a case are summarily recorded, including date, who contacted, and main items of discussion. Files should also contain records of any preparation courses undertaken by applicants.

The area of recording of assessment interviews is the area where there can be greatest diversity of practice. We suggest that, for the purpose of recording the facts surrounding an interview, a form with standard headings should be used which would include details such as
- Date, Applicant, Worker
- Areas covered in conversation, questions
- Relevant information obtained
- Issues emerging & areas requiring further exploration
- Analysis/ insights obtained
- Contribution to conclusion

Even though recorded in workers handwriting, this should be adequate for supervision purposes. This approach would help towards strengthening the analytical aspect of the process.

It is suggested that originals of certificates and letters from referees should not be on the main working file. There should be a corresponding certificates file where these documents are kept. The references should be kept on a restricted basis, because they are obtained on a confidential basis.

8.4 Procedures for Complaints and Representations

It is recommended that each agency should have a procedure for dealing with complaints about the services it provides. This procedure may be part of the broader agency procedures, but should be included in the information packs provided and made available to persons involved in the adoption process. As a minimum it is recommended that the procedure should comprise the following:
- A specific designated point/ officer within the organisation to which complainants may be directed
- A mechanism for informal resolution of complaints
- A formal mechanism for investigating, reporting and adjudicating on complaints which have not been resolved through the informal system
8.5 Supervision And Quality Assurance

8.5.1 Introduction
Striving for quality services is now a normal part of public service provision. In the case of adoption, where some of the most vulnerable members of society are the subject of the process, it is most especially relevant. Supervision, which also includes a staff support function, and quality assurance mechanisms are needed to ensure that the children at the centre of adoption are well catered for.

While it is beyond the remit of this guide to develop new supervision and quality assurance arrangements, it is appropriate for the guide to restate the supervision and quality assurance frameworks within which the new standardised framework for domestic adoption should be used. The standardised framework itself is, of course, a very significant element of quality assurance, be defining a standard process for all concerned.

8.5.2 The Role of the Supervisor

The following are some of the core questions which the supervisor of adoption practice needs to bear in mind:

- Are the child’s needs clearly identified, stated and reported?
- Are the strengths of proposed adopters in relation to the child clearly stated?
- Is the existing relationship, and attitude of proposed adopter to the child reported?
- Do the proposed adopters demonstrate an understanding of child and acceptance of them as they are?
- Do the proposed adopters demonstrate insight into their actions and how they may impact on child?
- In relative adoptions, is the pattern of relationships with birth parents reported?
- Is the ability to provide permanent (long-term) care assessed?

8.5.3 Role of the Adoption Board/ Authority

The Report of the Domestic Adoption Sub-Group has set out a series of recommendations which impact on this area. This report was an appendix to the RFP documentation for this project, and the Report and its recommendations are taken as one of the context markers for the development of the standardised framework.

Recommendation 1 of this Report is that the Adoption Board/ Authority should have an inspectorate role over all aspects of domestic adoption. This recommendation is further expanded, with the details of the inspectorate role to be developed by the new Director of Social Work, when appointed. In its inspection role the Board/ Authority should visit health boards/ agencies, review policies, procedures and standards and interview parties to adoptions, where appropriate.
The Sub-Group recommended that the Adoption Board should draw up standards for adoption, including family adoption. They recognised that there are a number of key steps (other than filling recommended staffing positions) which are necessary to successfully implement this recommendation. These include:

- This standardised framework needed to be developed, agreed by the key decision makers and promulgated as the norm for work in the domestic adoption area.
- Health board social workers and the Adoption Board/Authority inspectorate need to be trained in the provisions of the standardised framework.
- The relevant parts of the standardised framework need to be incorporated into “standard for adoption” which will be monitored and evaluated by the Adoption Board/Authority.
LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix 1</th>
<th>Consultation and Research Undertaken as Part of the Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2</td>
<td>The Recommendations of the Domestic Adoption Sub-Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 3</td>
<td>Sample Forms used in Domestic Adoption Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4</td>
<td>Sample Information Leaflets for Domestic Adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 5</td>
<td>Suggested Roles of Agency Medical Adviser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 6</td>
<td>The Evolution of Assessment Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 7</td>
<td>Additional Reading Material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 8</td>
<td>Literature Referenced in the Guide for Practitioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 9</td>
<td>Use of Genograms, Ecomaps and Sociograms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 1

CONSULTATION AND RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN AS PART OF STUDY

In accordance with our terms of reference, the following consultation meetings and research sources were engaged as part of the study leading to the drafting of the Guide for Practitioners.

Consultation Meetings held:
- Meeting with administrators in the Adoption Board to discuss the legal parameters of Irish Adoption
- Three half-day meetings with the social workers of the Adoption Board to discuss their practice in assessment of four of the five strands of domestic adoption.
- Attendance at half-yearly meeting of the Council of Irish Adoption Agencies to explain the proposed framework and to invite comments and suggestions.
- Consultation with Principal Social Worker and team leader of health board Adoption and Fostering teams at their three monthly scheduled meeting in Portlaoise.
- Half-day meeting with Dublin based voluntary adoption agencies currently involved in assessment of prospective adopters and placement of non relative/stranger babies.
- Discussion with team leader on ICA team in Dublin about preparation groups and report writing.

Written Sources of Information:
- The Adoption Board wrote to all adoption agencies and health boards, inviting a written submission on any issue that should be addressed in the study.
- A random sample of adoption files in the Adoption Board were examined to help identify relevant issues.
- A random sample of adoptions effected in 2003 were surveyed. The Adoption Board wrote to the adoptive parents who represented the five strands of domestic adoption, inviting them to participate in the research. They were asked about their experience of the adoption process, what was most helpful, least helpful and what changes they would propose.
APPENDIX 2

THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE DOMESTIC ADOPTION SUB-GROUP

- The Adoption Board/ Authority should have an inspectorate role over all aspects of domestic adoption.
- The assessment and processing of step-parent and relative adoptions should be devolved to the health boards.
- Getting Garda reports should be devolved to the health boards.
- Health boards should be pro-active in ensuring that adoption is considered, where appropriate, for children in long-term care and hard to place children.
- There should be legislative change which would make children of marriage eligible for adoption.
- There should be an option of ‘open adoption’/ post-adoption access – ie to make it possible to include conditions in adoption orders such as continuing access for birth parent/s, whether in ‘stranger’ or family adoptions. There should also be a right to vary the conditions, where necessary.
- There should be an alternative to adoption by the mother in step-parent cases where the mother wants to share legal/parental rights over the child with her husband.
- Post-adoption support services should be developed for all adoptions, including domestic adoptions.
- Adoption panels, including their membership, protocols and decision-making processes need to be standardised.
- Medical expertise should be available to each health board and the medical personnel should form linkages to further develop expertise and respond to emerging trends.
- The Adoption Board/ Authority should have access to appropriate medical expertise and take a lead role in the development of medical standards.
- An independent mediation service needs to be developed to assist with contested adoption cases.
- A national policy on the management of reclaiming children placed for adoption needs to be developed.
- Where the domestic adoption (placement) services is being provided by registered adoption agencies there should be a clear service agreement between the agency and the health board.
- The final consent form needs to be made more user-friendly.
- The practice of the health boards/ agencies should be examined to identify factors which cause delay in the placement of children.
- There should not be a statutory right to assessment for domestic adoption.
- If a child has been placed on eg a fostering basis, with an un-married couple, it should be possible to make an adoption order where there is a pre-existing relationship with the child and if the Adoption Board is satisfied that it is in the child’s best interests.
- Consideration should be given to legislating for the compulsory registration of the father on the birth certificate of children where the father’s identity is known.
- Accessible legal advice needs to be available to the Adoption Board.
- Training for all personnel involved in adoption is essential.
APPENDIX 3

SAMPLE FORMS USED IN DOMESTIC ADOPTION PRACTICE

This Appendix should contain sample forms that may be used by agencies in connection with domestic adoption practice. It is suggested that the forms in use should be derived from the current Adoption Board forms, and developed by the practitioners. Other relevant material developed at local level can be stored in this section of the Manual.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owner of this form</th>
<th>Ref No of Form</th>
<th>Title of Form</th>
<th>Who is involved in filling in the form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adoption Act, 1964 Section 10 (1) (a) (ii)</td>
<td>Notice of Placement of Child with a view to Adoption</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Report on Infant proposed for Adoption</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionaire of Child’s Natural Father and Affidavit of Witness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionaire of Child’s Natural Mother and Affidavit of Witness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form NF1 Background Report on Natural Father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s Affidavit in respect of NF1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 2A Background Report on Child and Natural Parents</td>
<td>Completed by the Adoption Agency for each application</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 2B Background Report on Child and Natural Parents</td>
<td>Completed by applicants where the adoption was arranged other than by a registered adoption society or health board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 10 Adoption Acts, 1952 to 1991</td>
<td>Memo to be furnished by a Registered Adoption Society to a mother, father or guardian who proposes to place a child with the RAS for adoption</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Bord Uchtala Form F1 Schedule Notice to the Adoption Board by a father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Bord Uchtala Form F2 Request to the Adoption Board seeking a copy of any notice from the father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Bord Uchtala Form F3 Notice to a father of the deferral of an adoption placement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Bord Uchtala Form F4 Notice to a mother of the deferral of an adoption placement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 3A Consent to Adoption (for use by the mother where the identity of applicant is known to her)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 3B Consent to Adoption (for use by persons other than the mother where the identity of the applicant is known to the consenting party)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Form 3C | Consent to Adoption  
(for use by the mother where the identity of applicant is known to her) |
| Form 3D | Consent to Adoption  
(for use by persons other than the mother where the identity of the applicant is known to the consenting party) |
| Form 4A | Consent to Adoption  
(for use by the mother where the identity of applicant is known to her) |
| Form 4B | Consent to Adoption  
(for use by persons other than the mother where the identity of the applicant is known to the consenting party) |
| Form 5A | Consent to Adoption (where the applicant is a widow/widower and is known to the consenting party) |
| Form 5B | Consent to Adoption (where the applicant is a widow/widower and is not known to the consenting party) |
| Form 5C | Consent to Adoption (where the applicant is a widow/widower and is known to the consenting party) |
| Form 5D | Consent to Adoption (where the applicant is a widow/widower and is not known to the consenting party) |
| Form 1 | Application for Adoption Order |
| BAAF AH1 | Typically used to obtain medical reports on prospective adopters |
| | Suggestion that applicants should complete lifestyle part, GP then uses this with medical examination and patient history to identify health risk factors. Statement at end of form (opinion) also to be revised |
APPENDIX 4

LIST OF SAMPLE INFORMATION LEAFLETS FOR DOMESTIC ADOPTION

This Appendix should contain sample information leaflets that may be used by agencies in connection with domestic adoption practice. It is suggested that the leaflets should be similar in style to those in use in connection with inter-country adoption, and developed by the practitioners. Other relevant information material developed at local level can be stored in this section of the Manual.

- Domestic Adoption – Information for Adoptive Parents (summarising the Standardised Framework and focussing on the Child in Adoption)
  It is recommended that there should be five leaflets – one for each strand.
- Domestic Adoption – Understanding the Assessment Process (summarising the process and setting out the criteria for eligibility under each strand of Domestic Adoption, as well as the approach to assessing suitability
- Information and Advice for potential applicants, including what is expected of adopters
- Each health board/ agency should prepare and issue an information leaflet or standard letter on its own policy and procedures for making applications.
APPENDIX 5

SUGGESTED ROLES OF AGENCY MEDICAL ADVISER

- Attending and participating as a member of the Adoption Committee
- Assessing the medical history and health of potential adopters, making further enquiries as necessary, and preparing medical reports/opinions on potential adopters for the Committee/Agency
- Collating and assessing medical and health information from birth families and making further enquiries as necessary. Providing advice on implications for child’s future health and development
- Collating the child’s health history, ensuring the child has a full medical and health functional assessment, and providing a report to the Committee/Agency. This should indicate any special needs, how these can be met and the likely effect on the child’s future health and development.
- Liaising with health professionals involved with the child both before and after placement, and ensuring co-ordination and continuity of health care and records when the child moves
- Giving pre-placement information and advice on health issues to prospective adopters
- Providing post-placement and post adoption support and advice on medical matters if possible
- Advising on disclosure of medical and health information, including information that becomes available after adoption
APPENDIX 6

THE EVOLUTION OF ASSESSMENT PRACTICE

Introduction to Assessment
In this chapter we review the issue of “assessment” which is at the heart of the social workers role in the adoption process. Much of the material in this chapter was initially published in the Inter-Country Adoption Report (O’Brien and Richardson, 1998). An edited version is repeated here for the sake of completeness, and to provide workers in the Domestic adoption field with a self-contained manual.

The Legislative Framework

The legislative framework governing adoption is discussed in Chapter 3. The need for assessment in adoption arises from the requirements of the Adoption Act, 1952. Section 13 of the 1952 legislation states that:

(1) The (Adoption) Board shall not make an adoption order unless satisfied that the applicant is of good moral character, has sufficient means to support the child and is a suitable person to have parental rights and duties in respect of the child.

(2) Where the applicants are a married couple, the Board shall satisfy itself as to the moral character and suitability of each of them.

It is the requirement to establish suitability of applicants that has led to development of assessment. This matter is not regulated beyond what is stated in the primary legislation. This situation has allowed a “good practice” approach to be used in adoption assessment. The evolution of the good practice approach is described in the following sections.

The Place of Assessment

Assessments have a crucial part to play in successful placements. They provide the agency with important information, and applicants come to learn about the facets of adoption and a relationship is established with the worker.

Methods of assessment have changed over time. An examination of the shifts in assessment practices provides a context for understanding the concepts which underpin the practice of assessment, and how the suitability of families for the adoption task is determined. It is possible to trace a gradual evolution from a psychodynamically oriented assessment to a task-centred approach with a focus on group-based training (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). A brief summary of the theoretical and practice shifts in the models of assessments used to ascertain the suitability of families for adoption is presented. A description of current practice and standards in assessment as espoused by the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the Australian Adoption Legislative Review Committee is also given.

Definition of Assessment
Assessment is generally defined as a two-way process whereby the applicants and the agency share information and decide together if adopting a child will work for all the parties concerned, including the potential child. Underpinning the assessment process are criteria and standards for selection by the agency. It is against these standards that the social worker must construct a methodology to elicit and provide information, to facilitate decision making, to evaluate potential and to recommend placement type (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). The general aims of assessment are to address the needs of children by identifying potentially good quality, safe homes. Quality standards determine that each child has the right to be cared for by parents who possess appropriate skills, training and support. Safe care relates to the concern that children will be placed in safe, non-abusive homes (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

**Historical Overview of Models of Assessment**

Moving on to the evolution of the models of assessment, three assessment models spanning three different time-frames 1960-1970; 1970-1984; and 1985-date, can be denoted. These are relatively arbitrary time distinctions, as changes in theory and practice occur at different rates from area to area, as shown by American, English and Irish literature (George 1970; Hartman 1979; Smith 1984; Triseliotis 1988). Practice models governing the assessment format however have followed similar trends in the three countries. Prior to describing the traditional model of assessment, it is important to firstly discuss the informal selection procedures prevalent before standards were introduced in the earlier part of the twentieth century.

**Informal Assessments**

Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and the initial stages of the twentieth century, child welfare was viewed as a philanthropic pursuit, not a professional one (Gill, 1997). The selection of families for abandoned children focused solely on the moral and physical characteristics of the prospective adopters. The main criterion in selection proceeded on the basis that a good Christian family was the ideal family for rescued children. At the time there was a widespread, abiding faith in the goodness of the rural, Christian home. The screening process was therefore informal, designed to verify the character, kindness and good intentions of the applicants (Gill, 1997). The applicants rejected were those known to be cruel and those who wanted merely to exploit the children’s labour.

The standards for selection that were set at the time were straightforward, easily observable and directly related to the welfare of the child. They involved physical and external standards of behaviour and economics. There was also an obsession with matching the characteristics of the child - physical, racial, intellectual, religious, and otherwise with those of the adoptive parent (Gill, 1997). This stands in stark contrast to the more rigorous and psychologically driven standards of emotional health and well-being prevalent later on in the twentieth century.

**The Traditional Approach (1960-1970)**

The traditional model of assessment was dominant up to 1970 (Dubois 1987; Smith 1984; Hartman 1979). During this time period, adoption professionals were only
beginning to establish common standards and practices, as social work began to shift from a philanthropic sideline to a professional career (Gill, 1997). The focus of concern surrounded vetting people as to their suitability to adopt. The model was built on the premise that “applicants either have or do not have the necessary characteristics and qualities to make successful adoptive parents and that skilled social work investigation can select those who have whatever it is the social worker is looking for, to a sufficient degree to pass the test” (Smith, 1984: 15). In this approach the social worker makes the choice. As Gill (1997) points out, the adoption agencies were confident in their right and competence to select the “best” adoptive parents. Their conflation of “best” with “normal”, however led to the enforcement of a singular vision of the ideal family (Gill, 1997). The quest for the pursuit of ideal families, however, demanded an intrusive enquiry into the most intimate aspects of applicants’ lives.

There were many critics of this model of assessment. Shaw argues against the social worker’s role as inquisitor, detached from and superior to the applicants, probing and waiting to catch them out in a wrong answer (Shaw, 1988). Smith argued increasingly against the traditional model, with the contention that the investigative method was flawed and lacking in agreed criteria surrounding measures of acceptability. It was argued that all the power was located with the worker, thus the relationship between the worker and the applicant proceeded on the basis of a closed style of communication (Selwyn, 1994). Hartman (1979) questioned the myth that the worker could gather information about as complex a system as the human family and make reliable judgements and predictions about that system’s capacity to rear a child. Smith and indeed Kirk (Year) urged instead that “assessment and selection should be discarded in favour of an approach which prepares prospective substitute parents for their distinctive role” (1984: 30).

The Educational/ Preparation Approach (1970-1985)

The second broad time frame, from the early 1970’s to the mid 1980’s, was largely concerned with exploring an assessment model based on both education and preparation. The model favors an empowering approach, where if people are given adequate information regarding role and agency expectations, they can then choose whether they have the resources to undertake the task. Applicants were to be enabled through training to make their own decisions about their suitability as adopters (Selwyn, 1994).

Within this model the emphasis on an assessment role for social workers remains important. The social work role as assessor co-exists with an educational and facilitator role (Hartman 1979; Triseliotis 1988; Davis and Morris 1984). As a response to this developing trend, courses to train prospective parents were developed, such as “Parenting Plus” first developed by Child Welfare League of America (Crowley 1982) and “The Challenge of Foster Care” developed by the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) in 1991. Professional practice in agencies in the UK was altered by the shift in emphasis, and different workers were allocated to fulfill the assessment and educational roles (Rhodes 1992).

Self-Selection 1984 -Present
The model of practice which has been developing from the mid-1980’s to the present is known as self-selection (Ryburn 1991; Cain 1993; Laird and Hartman 1985). The shift in interest to self-selection arises from a questioning of the assessment process by social workers and applicants. In tracing this development, Ryburn argues that the more traditional assessment practice was deeply dis-empowering and a weakness-based approach. Drawing on his own experience of assessment, he recalled that there was more emphasis on “my potential failings, not my capacity to change, to modify and to grow into the job” (Ryburn 1995: 38). Ryburn references social constructionist premises as influential in questioning if “through some skill assessment process professionals can decide who is and who’s not suitable to become a ... carer” (Ryburn 1995: 37). According to Ryburn, the central issue to be addressed is the belief that “there is an independent objective reality against which, through a process of enquiry, prospective adopters can be measured and appropriate placements can be made” (1991: 20). Ryburn (1991) suggests that such a belief accords to recruitment and placement, a scientific base that is removed from the hit and miss process which he thinks it really is. He vociferously argues that the belief that social workers know best is in fact spurious. According to Ryburn (1991) objective assessment is akin to a myth.

The social work role in the self-selection model is one of facilitator. The ramifications of this include a more balanced power relationship between applicant and worker and more openness and honesty expressed by the potential adopters (Stevenson, 1991). The approach is based on the principle of self-determination and the applicants play a major role in evaluating their own families as resources and in the decision-making process. Empowerment is not achieved solely by giving information or by training but by helping applicants redefine themselves as adoptive parents. Workers need to be clear about their role, their use of power and their goals in empowerment-oriented practice (Selwyn, 1994). However, while self-selection propels the process, the agency has ultimate responsibility to decide if applicants are suitable to parent children in the agency’s care.

**Group Work in Assessment**

There has also been development towards preparing and assessing people within groups. With the traditional method, it is much easier for couples to have “played the game” and tried to impress the social worker during the home visits, but within the group they are prevented from doing so (Stevenson, 1991). The main exponent of the use of groups in the preparation of adoptive parents was Kirk (1964), however his ideas were not widely taken up for another 10-15 years. Through the group, applicants are subjected to an educational process in which they can learn enough about themselves, their motives and needs to bring them to the stage of deciding for themselves whether they should adopt or not (Triseliotis, 1997). The group provides a less formal setting for exploring ideas and feelings, moreover participants are more receptive to observations and suggestions made by peers (Triseliotis, 1997). Furthermore, issues like motivation can be examined in a climate of safety and mutual support.

The sharing of the facilitation role between social worker and adoptive parent is a new departure in the preparation stage. This is based on the premise that applicants in preparation will be enhanced by having exposure to both experiences.
Conclusion on Historical Evolution of Assessment

In summation, the implications of the self-selection approach, has far reaching consequences, connected with power, partnership, empowerment, marginalisation and normalisation. The practice activities in the self-selection approach to assessment are not greatly different from the techniques discussed in the education/preparation model. The distinction between the two models regards the increased emphasis placed on enabling applicants to understand the process they have entered into in self-selection. However, despite the references to the development of a self-selection approach to assessment in the literature, the education/preparation approach is still more dominant in practice (Rhodes 1991, Ryburn, 1991).

A Systemic Approach to Assessment

A growing frustration with traditional family assessment which focused on past history, coupled with a belief that it was more important to look at a family’s current functioning, led to the introduction of a systemic approach to family assessment (BAAF, 1996). According to systemic theory, individuals do not function in isolation but rather as part of highly organised systems, often with consistent behavioural patterns and beliefs (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

A systemic assessment model is based on the premise that the adoptive family as a whole serves as the context for any placement. The approach gives due attention to the need to achieve a fuller understanding of family relationships and possible points of strain and tension, as every member of a household will both affect and be affected by the presence of an adopted child (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). The systemic framework brings into focus the “who’s who” in the adoptive family configuration and provides a collaborative and co-operative milieu for the assessment process (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). Therefore it goes some way to make the assessment process “more open and objective and less dependent on the judgement and intuitive flair of the individual worker” (McCracken and Reilly, 1998: 20). The richness of working with what happens, not just what is said, provides another level of evidence for assessment (BAAF, 1996). Most importantly, by understanding family networks and the systems which impinge on them, the systemic approach values and empowers adults and children alike, giving voice to all the significant family members (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

The content of systemic assessment includes material from the applicant’s own life experience and how this has influenced them as adults. However, the focus is firmly on the present as opposed to the past. By identifying the systems and sub-systems which make up the day to day lives of potential carers, the applicants, together with the social worker, are freed to explore behaviours and relationships, the routines and rituals, the family rules and boundaries, the support networks and stresses. Terminology in systemic theory such as recursiveness, circularity or reflexivity all capture the dynamic and evolving process whereby new information is absorbed, reflected upon and shapes future ideas and actions (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

The British Agency for Adoption and Fostering, the Child Welfare League of America and the Adoption Legislative Review Committee in Western Australia all
embrace the current orthodoxy surrounding the systemic perspective. They provide a
guide for understanding the assessment process and represent a reflection of current
practice in adoption assessment. The central aim of assessment as outlined by BAAF
(1998), is to help families understand how children’s emotional well-being and
behaviour will be affected by their early experiences. Thus a realistic understanding
of the needs and behaviour of children who need adoption and of the adoption
relationship’s impact on them can be formed (CWLA, 1988). A parallel objective is
to help families understand what parenting another person’s child will be like for all
members of the family. BAAF’s information guide advocates the need for openness
throughout the assessment process. Particular attention is paid to the need for
applicants to be open and honest in terms of how flexible they are prepared to be
about the sort of child they would consider for adoption. Openness is also
recommended in terms of divulging information regarding family.

Conclusion

As shown, current views on assessment regard the home study process as educative
and supportive. There is the idea of preparation through partnership, and the approach
is more or less task-centred (Triseliotis, 1997). However many prospective adopters
continue to feel the historical, evaluative legacy of practice, which often increases
their anxiety and undermines their self-confidence (Brodzinsky et al, 1998). Power is
a central issue in adoption assessment. Assessment is a two way process, however the
balance of power in this process is nevertheless unequal since the agency ultimately
makes the decision (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

There are high stakes involved in the selection of adoptive parents. The chance to
become a parent or regularising an existing relationship with a child, for many
applicants, lies in the hands of the evaluating agency. Honesty and openness are more
difficult to achieve, and refusal of an application carries with it huge emotional costs.
Therefore due to the high stakes involved it is imperative that the state should go to
great lengths to ensure that the screening process is fair (Gill, 1997).

It is our view that systemic theory and practice has a significant contribution to make
to domestic adoption assessment. The systemic model provides a ready made and
comprehensive framework for understanding families and the systems which
impinge on them. Importantly, the assessing worker is encouraged to maintain a
reflective and objective stance as a result of the rigours of systemic hypothesising
and consultation (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). However a systemic application
does not rule out the fact that social workers can never fully determine risk, rule out
the possibility of abuse by adoptive parents, or predict successful outcomes
(McCracken and Reilly, 1998).

In conclusion, assessment may be criticised for its lack of a coherent theoretical base
and its susceptibility to the orthodoxies currently in fashion. Moreover, the values of
partnership and empowerment, on which the self-selection approach is built, are
somewhat at variance with practices and values underlying the social control
function of child protection practice. This in turn results in a paradoxical situation for
both worker and applicant. Looking at the current practice of assessment, which is
described in Chapter 3, it is apparent that the drive to empower prospective adopters
as well as the need to ensure safe and positive care for children has resulted in an
assessment process which, in practice, is in many senses a hybrid, comprising elements of previous models in terms of preparation and training, self-assessment, group assessment and vetting. (McCracken and Reilly, 1998).
APPENDIX 7

RECOMMENDED READING MATERIAL
(Supplied by Ms Ruth Kelly, Chairperson, CIAA)

BOOKS ON ADOPTION & ADOPTIVE PARENTING

1. “A Guide to Adoption – The Other Road to Parenthood” by Deborah Fowler. Published by Optima 1993.


3. “Explaining Adoption to your Adopted Child” a guide for Adoptive Parents by Prue Chennell. Published by British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering 1987.


25. THE ADOPTION PAPERS, Jackie Kay Bloodaxe Books, available from Bookstall Forum Ltd e mail enq@booksstallforum.co.uk

BOOKS ON BIRTHMOTHERS


League of America, Inc. 1989

BOOKS ON OPEN ADOPTION

1. “Adoption Today – Change & Choice in New Zealand (Chapter 7)”
   Jenny Rockel and Murray Rayburn, Heineman Reed, Auckland 1988

2. “Open Adoption, The Philosophy and the Practice” edited by
   Audgrey Mullender, BAAF London 1991

3. “The Open Adoption Experience” A completed guide for Adoptive and
   Birth Families from making the decision through the child’s growing
   years by Lois Ruskai Melina and Sharon Kaplan Roszia. Published by

4. “Staying connected – Managing contact arrangements in
   Adoption” edited by Heidi Argent BAAF London 2002.

ADOPTION GENERAL

1. “Patterns of Adoption – Nature, Nurture and Psychosocial
   Development”. David Howe. Publisher: Blackwell Science Ltd.
   1998

2. “The Dynamics of Adoption – Social and Personal Perspectives”.

3. “Adoption – Theory, Policy and Practice”. John Triseliotis, Joan


   Search, Reunion & Beyond. Julie Jarrell Bailey & Lynn N. Giddens M.A.
   New Harbinger Publications Inc. 2001

BOOKS ON SEARCH/TRACE & REUNION IN ADOPTION


23. Within me, Without me – Adoption and open and shut case?
   Sue Wells, Scarlet Press ISBN 1 85727 0428
   Stories of Birth Mothers.

24. “I would have searched forever”...Sandra Kay Musser, Adoption Awareness Press, Division of The Musser Foundation, P.O. Box 1860, Cape Coral FL 33910 ISBN 0-934896-00-3


   Written by an adopted person about the process of reunion, plus the thoughts, feelings, etc. that go through your mind during the reunion process.

   Written by an adoptive parent about how she came to understand what her adopted daughter felt about adoption.

   Novel about a man who decides to search for his birth mother.

11. Outer Search Inner Journey – International Adoption The Foreign Adoptees Point of View.  Peter F. Dodds
   (Publisher – Aphrodite) ISBN 1-889702-24-2

   (An adopted person searching for her birthmother).


ARTICLES FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

OPEN ADOPTION

(Articles taken from Adoption Studies Institute 1996 – Ref. wwwAdoption – studies – org.)

“Openness in Adoption” by Renee Garfinkel
“Open Adoption” An overview, Carol & James Lieberman

Research shows there is no one approach to Adoption.

“Open & Closed – Adoption Casework in the Nineties”
Byrd, Heagany & Burton

“Open Adoption – An Alternative for the 90’s”
Samuel Totaro

“Open Adoption – A True Life Experience”
Nanci Worcester
“A Perspective: Fears & Reality about Open Adoption”
Sandy Batton

How Open Adoption Works Out

“A Letter to Adoptive Parents on Open Adoption”
Randolph Severson

“Open Adoption as Standard Practice”
Reuben Pannor & Annette Baran, Child Welfare 1984

Two Sides of Adoption

BONDING & ATTACHMENT

“Raising Adopted Children” Lois Melina, Chapter 3, Bonding & Attachment


“Attachment & Separation” Vera Falberg, BAAF

“Real Parents, Real Children – Parenting the Adopted Child”
Holly van Gulden & Lisa Bartels-Rabb, Chapter 2

TELLING

“Talking to your child about Adoption”

“Explaining Adoption” BAAF

“Explaining Adoption to Children who have been adopted”
Alan Burnell

“Raising Adopted Children” L. Melina, Chapter 4 “Talking with children about Adoption”

ADOPTIVE PARENTING

“Parenting your Adopted Child” Stephanie Siegel, Chapter 4

“The Terrific & Terrible Toddler”

“Thoughts for Adoptive Parents” Post Adoption Centre

“Parental Guidelines for helping children cope with loss”
“Raising Adopted Children” L. Melina, Chapter 5. “How Adoption affects the Family”

“Post Adoption Depression Syndrome” June Bond

CHILDREN

1. “A Child’s Guide to Adoption – Andy’s Big Question” by Carolyn Nystrom. The Lion Care Series 1987


3. “Did my first Mother love me?” A story for an Adopted Child by Kathryn Ann Miller, Morning Glory Press.

4. “Why was I adopted” by Carole Livingston. Published by Carol Publishing Group, New York 1990.

5. “Tell me again about the night I was born” Jamie Lee Curtis Little Hippo (imprint of Scholastic Press) London 1999

TEENAGERS


For the following books, please see tapestry books.com for publishing details:


5. “Why didn’t she keep me? - Answers to the Question every Adopted Child Asks” By Barbara Burlingham – Brown 1994

INFERTILITY

“Adoption after Infertility” by Patricia Irwin Johnston, Perspectives Press, Indianapolis 1992


OTHERS

Yesterday’s Adoptions
Taken from Adoption Today, Change & Choice in New Zealand, Rockel & Rayburn

Why won’t my Birthmother meet me?
Carole Anderson

The Recovery Process, Post Reunion
Kate Neal

Sexual Attraction Following Reunion (GSA)
Post Adoption Centre

Getting Moral Support

Chapter 4 – Growing up adopted
Chapter 7 – Backstage Pre-Union Jitters
Chapter 8 – You’re On. The Reunion
Chapter 9 – Post Reunion. Short Term Issues
Chapter 10 – Post Reunion. Long Term Issues

Taken from: “Adoption Reunions” by Michelle McColm, Second Story Press, Ontario 1993
CIAA - LIST OF RELEVANT IRISH RESEARCH COLLECTED AS AT MARCH 2004


2. Alice Curtis : Open Adoption - Implications for the members of the Adoption Triangle. Dissertation submitted to the National University of Ireland, Dublin in part fulfillment of the degree of Master of Social Science (Social Work) (2001)


6. Vivienne Darling : Adoption in Ireland, Care Discussion Paper No.1


9. Pat Neville : Assessments for Inter-Country Adoption in the North-Eastern Health Board : A Search for a New Model. A dissertation submitted to the National University of Ireland, Dublin in part fulfillment of the degree of Master of Social Science (Social Work) Mode B, August 2000


12. Ruth Kelly : Motherhood Silenced, Natural Mothers reflections on Adoption Reunion, A dissertation submitted to Trinity College, Dublin in


USEFUL ADDRESSES
British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF)
Skyline House,
200 Union Street,
London SE1 OLX
Tel. No. 0044 2071 593 2000

Adoption Board
Shelbourne House
Shelbourne Road
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4
Tel. No. 01-6671392

Barnardos
Christchurch Square
Dublin 8
Tel. 01-4546388 (Tuesday 2pm – 5pm; Thursday 10am – 2pm)

Adoptive Parents Association
Glendalough P.O.
Co. Wicklow.
Helen Gilmartin, Secretary
Telephone: 0404-45184
Fax: 0404-45700
Email: apai@eircom.ie

Helen Scott, P.R.O.
Natural Parents Network
P.O. Box No. 6714
Dublin 4.
Telephone No: 01-8256961

Adopted Peoples Association
(Contact Register)
27 Templeview Green
Clare Hall
Dublin 13.
Tel No: 01-8674033 (Monday & Thursday 2pm – 4pm)
Useful Websites
Amazon.com.uk
Academybooks.freeserve.co.uk
Tapestrybooks.com

ACADEMY BOOK SERVICES
Publishers from whom these books are available.
1. roy@academybooks.freeserve.co.uk
2. www.smallwood.co.uk
3. www.amazon.com
4. bbovd@youngandyoung.com
APPENDIX 8

LITERATURE REFERENCED IN
THE GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS


Farrelly Conway E (1993) Search and Reunion in the Adoption Triangle: Towards a Framework for Agency Service to the Adoption Triad, Occassional Paper, Department of Social Studies, Trinity College 1993


O’Brien V (1997) Fostering the Family : A New Systemic Approach to Evolving Networks of Relative Care, PhD submitted to National University of Ireland.


APPENDIX 9

USE OF GENOGRAMS, ECOMAPS AND SOCIOGRAMS

The use of genograms, ecomaps and sociograms can assist the social worker in adoption, but particularly in relation to relative adoptions. While it is beyond the scope of this Guide to give detailed advise on the use of these techniques, a summary on each is included for the benefit of practitioners. Further exploration and information on the use of these techniques, may be found in McGoldrick & Gerson (1985) and Portengen & van den Neut (1999)

The Genogram - What it is?

1. Family Tree
2. Shows family over three generations
3. Shows family development over time
4. By adding a few descriptive words and others symbols and lines, we can make a descriptive diagram of family
5. By looking at events and people it can help family members to understand how they have been influenced by their family history and membership
6. The use of the Genogram must be linked to an objective
7. For symbols and lines used see page 60, McGoldrick & Gersen (1985),

Why the Genogram may be useful?

1. Helps worker in process of gathering information
2. Helps worker assess the family system
3. Shows how family has dealt with change and transition
4. Family members what is expected of them
5. Offers an opportunity to talk about what family values was part of growing up experience and what values are now part of current family
6. Helps to identify the difference between different branches of family
7. Shows how family defines itself
8. Provides opportunity to talk about family relationships: generation, dates, coincidence of dates
9. Provides opportunity to talk about family relationships and value of roles, rituals, responsibilities and routines
10. Identifies the interventions that may be needed

Who do you do a Genogram with?

Each genogram is done from the person’s own perspective, and the difference between the genograms can bring forth important information
Birth parents
Relatives
Child

When do you use the Genogram?
1. Begin to construct with different parties at beginning of case
2. Build up picture over time
3. Detailed conversation needed with parents at point of locating and mobilising network (though it would be important to have this information as part of overall casework)
4. At point of mobilising network, use frame of Genogram with all relatives
5. Draw more detailed Genogram with relative proposing to care or already caring

How do you use the Genogram?

The use of the Genogram must be linked to an objective

Need to know symbols (see attached sheet with symbols)
Need to know lines to describe family relationships
Quality of neatness not important
Need big pieces of paper (A3)
Use pencil facilitates fixing up

Be clear on purpose:
information gathering for initial assessment and support
Interpreting and understanding meaning in system

Give page to people initially to identify key people (this may not be appropriate and all work may need to be done with participants)

Use over different stages of assessment: these discussions particularly important in discussion with birth parents and relatives and child depending on age.

First impressions

1. When drawing it, ask family member what their impressions are rather than putting forth own view
2. Put own view forward tentatively
3. Ask family member to describe family members and who may be like whom
4. (pay particular attention to triad of birth parents: child and relative)

Guidance

As part of the evaluation of the relative home for the specific child, it is suggested that the genogram combined with the ecomap is an important medium through which to discuss the issues of attachment, loss, value systems in home, developmental needs and how to meet them and assessing family strengths

Nature of attachments

1. Use symbols to describe attachments to key people: stage of information required will determine the questions
Meeting developmental issues

1. Who met their needs as children
2. What needs were not met
3. How have they coped with this
4. Were all children treated the same? If so, what implications

Value System

1. Rules
2. Roles
3. Rituals
4. Responsibilities
5. Routines
6. Relationships

How were these values experienced growing up? What values did you retain in current family?
What do the relatives and birth parents do the same and what are the differences?

Assess Family strengths and needs

1. Who maintains connection with whom and how
2. How is difference handled
3. How are differences and conflicts resolved?
4. How is change managed

Use discussion of values and patterns to discuss the reality of kinship caring

Loss

1. Relatives as loss managers
2. What are their losses?
3. What did they do?
4. What strengths?
5. Who helped them?
6. What are the losses of the child?
7. How will child deal with loss of birth parents?
8. How will family deal with this?
9. What skills and strengths does child have?

What is their understanding of loss as experienced by them and by the child?
Can they use their own experiences appropriately
What are the stories of loss in family system and what is the meaning attributed to this?
Ask if they can see family patterns?
What is the Ecomap?

1. Interactive tool
2. Map to examine social network
3. A map of their own context and contacts
4. Way of helping family members relate and assess their own relationship to each other and other systems and to get an overall picture of the impact of their network of connections i.e. support or stress taking on a particular course of action

Why the Ecomap may be useful?

1. Helps obtain information re system
2. Useful way of finding contacts and potential supports
3. Locate strengths
4. Locate stresses
5. Locate sources of resources
6. Help family member understand issues in new way
7. Use it to highlight and discuss difference between reality and desired or necessary changes
8. Help to examine if family have willingness, ability resources to do more than they are doing
9. Help the child to let adults know the important people and resources and contacts in their life.

Who do you do the Ecomap with?

Do it individually with
   Child
   Birth Parents and do with both parent together if two parent family
   Relatives (especially those proposing to care) especially useful way to get to know who is who in family and good way to involve children in process

When do you use the Ecomap?

1. Child: beginning where care may be indicted
2. Birth Parents: when family involved initially with agency and link it to concerns
3. Relatives (when they put themselves forward or they are asked by agency)

How do you use the Ecomap?

1. Each individual’s ecomap different
2. Tie it very firmly to purpose
3. Open up conversation about their network
4. Be clear why you are using it with family member
5. It is used to achieve particular objectives
6. Draw circle in middle and put immediate family: If using ecomap as first intervention, little will be known about this family’s history. don’t go into it in too much detail as this can be obtained in Genogram interview)
7. Draw smaller circles around page
8. Divide page broadly into family: immediate; extended; like family
   Institutions/voluntary sector i.e. school, HB, court
   Professionals
   Work
   Leisure activities
   Friends

9. From centre draw relationship lines looking at
   strong
   tenuous,
   stressful and
   in which direction is flow of energy

10. Many ways to use and analyse an ecomap and it is important to link it with
    objectives and to use information shared as basis of hypothesis that is then shared
    with family (Not truth but more idea)

11. Link the ecomap with families or family members need for
12. Love in relationship that are safe and nurturing
13. Resources and people who are helping to achieve the developmental sage
14. Need for continuity
15. Need to manage change and transitions
16. Need to interact with other systems to help range of needs

17. Will current connections help you in your plan or to what extend is it potential
    source of stress?

18. What changes are anticipated if a child joins the family? this may be the point
    where conversation takes place particularly with children re their current
    relationship with child and expected changes
19. What implication if relative placement moves from informal to formal?
20. How might the ecomap look?
21. What is the family reaction to ecomap
22. Any particular issues that struck them in relation to family network: development
    issues: friends: professionals?
What is the Sociogram?

A map which enables the family member work out very specifically the details of contact

Why the Sociogram may be useful?

Details the level of support that is actually available to family member. This will help to assess if plan will work out. Identify sources of support, strengths and stresses which can be used in the broad assessment.

Who do you do the Sociogram with?

Birth parent
Child
Relatives

When do you use the Sociogram?

As genogram and ecomap

How do you use the Sociogram?

See Potrengen and van der Neut (1999)