

Equality Screening, Disability Duties and Human Rights Assessment Template

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Guidance on completion of the template can be found on the Equality Commission website at [S75 screening template 2010 \(web access checked 230920\) .docx](#)

Part 1. Policy scoping

1.1 Information about the policy

Name of the policy

Northern Ireland Fostering Services Minimum Standards

Is this an existing, revised or a new policy?

New. The Department of Health (DoH) has developed Northern Ireland Fostering Services Minimum Standards, which together with the Foster Placement and Fostering Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025, relevant to the placement of children in foster care, will form the basis of the regulatory framework for the conduct of fostering services in Northern Ireland. This paper is specifically relating to the Minimum Standards.

What is it trying to achieve? (intended aims/outcomes)

At 31 March 2024, there were 3,999¹ looked after children in Northern Ireland, with 83% of these children in foster care placements. This was 5% higher than at the same time the previous year. The number of looked after children in Northern Ireland has risen by 40% in the last ten years and by 72% since 1999, the year with the lowest recorded number of looked after children under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

It is widely recognised that foster parents make a vital contribution to our care system, by providing safe, stable and nurturing homes for children. Through positive and supportive day to day interactions underpinned by the trusted relationships they form, foster parents help children understand their past, experience normal family life and develop the skills and knowledge that they need to live independently as young adults.

Fostering continues to be the preferred placement option for children in care, 83% of these children in foster care placements - 50% placed in kinship care (where a child is living with a close relative or family friend) and 33% placed in non-kinship or independent foster care placements. There were 2,639 HSC Trust recruited foster carers (including kinship foster carers) and a further 254 Independent sector foster carers².

It is intended that the Minimum Standards will be used, both by fostering service providers and by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), to focus on securing positive welfare, health, and education outcomes for children, and reducing risks to their welfare and safety.

The Minimum Standards have been designed to reflect the Northern Ireland Framework for Integrated Therapeutic Care (NIFITC), which introduces a single regional approach to the

¹ Page 28 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

² Page 34 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

provision of trauma informed and rights-based care to care experienced children in all settings across Northern Ireland. Introduction of the Framework will progress in a planned and phased manner but over time it is anticipated that it will be in place for all settings for care experienced children including foster care settings.

Are there any Section 75 categories which might be expected to benefit from the intended policy?

If so, explain how.

Religious beliefs (all), Racial groups (all), Disability (all) and Political opinion (all)

All children currently living with foster carers, children in care for whom a foster placement is considered the most appropriate option to meet their needs, and children who may require to be placed with foster carers in future will benefit from the intended policy regardless of their religious beliefs, racial group, disability or political opinion.

Fostering services and foster parents will anticipate and where possible support the needs of all children for whom a foster placement is considered, that relate to their religious background, racial origin, disability, cultural or linguistic background, working in partnership with parents or other sources of specialist advice. Foster parents will understand and accommodate race, cultural and religious beliefs and practices in a respectful and positive manner. They will identify opportunities to celebrate traditions that promote a sense of identity and belonging.

While individualised care, reflective of assessed needs of the child, is at the core of the new standards, Standard 7 ('The intrinsic worth of each child in foster care is valued and promoted') is particularly focused on promoting equality, and is supported by three key areas and a number of indicators to address inequalities and support a positive self identity.

In relation to foster parents, there is a particular indicator within Standard 4 which requires all foster parents to be treated fairly at all stages of their foster care journey, and for fostering services to have in place an equal opportunities policy.

Who initiated or wrote the policy?

Department of Health (DoH) with input from a wide range of stakeholders from across the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors who, have a vested interest/ involvement in the field of fostering and who have provided valuable assistance in the development of this policy.

Who owns and who implements the policy?

The DoH owns the policy. Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts and independent fostering agencies will implement the policy. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) must consider the extent to which the minimum standards have been met and what remedial action is required and appropriate if the standards are not met.

1.2 Implementation factors

Are there any factors which could contribute to/detract from the intended aim/outcome of the policy/decision?

No

If yes, are they (please delete as appropriate)

~~financial~~

~~legislative~~

~~other:~~ please specify

1.3 Main stakeholders affected

Who are the internal and external stakeholders (actual or potential) that the policy will impact upon? (please delete as appropriate)

Staff

service users

other public sector organisations

voluntary/community/trade unions

other, please specify: All children currently living with foster carers, children in care for whom a foster placement is considered the most appropriate option to meet their needs, and children who may require to be placed with foster carers in future

1.4 Other policies with a bearing on this policy

- what are they?

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995
& subsequent Children Order Guidance

The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003

Minimum Standards for Kinship Care 2012

Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022

A Life Deserved: “Caring” for Children & Young People in Northern Ireland*

Children and Young People’s Strategy*

Health and Well Being 2026: Delivering Together

- who owns them?

Department of Health

Department of Health and Department of Education*

1.5 Available evidence

What evidence/information (both qualitative and quantitative) have you gathered to inform this policy? Specify details for each of the Section 75 categories.

Section 75 category	Details of evidence/information
Religious belief	<p>83% of the 3,999 children in care at 31 March 2024³ were being looked after in foster care placements.</p> <p>Of the total number of looked after children at 31 March 2024⁴:</p> <p>46% were from a Catholic background 33% were from Protestant/ other Christian background. 7% were from other religious backgrounds 6% indicated no religious faith 8% were unknown.</p>

³ Page 36 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

⁴ Page 30 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

Section 75 category	Details of evidence/information
Political opinion	The political opinion of looked after children and young people is not known as it is not collected however, we can use religion as a proxy here (see data above)
Racial group	<p>Of the 3,999 children looked after at 31 March 2024⁵:</p> <p>89% were white, 3% were black, 1% Irish Traveller and 5% were of mixed or other ethnicities. The remaining 2% did not have ethnicity stated.</p>
Age	<p>Of the 3,999 children looked after at 31 March 2024⁶:</p> <p>3% were under the age of 1 19% were aged 1 – 4 36% were aged 5 – 11 24% were aged 12 – 15 17% were aged 16+</p> <p>The age of a child in care can have an influence on the suitability of placement. In all age groups the majority of children were placed in foster care, though this proportion decreased for the older age groups, and only 63% of those aged 16 and over were in a foster care placement.</p>
Marital status	N/A
Sexual orientation	N/A
Men and women generally	<p>Of the 3,999 children looked after at 31 March 2024⁷:</p> <p>54% were male 46% were female</p>

⁵ Page 30 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

⁶ Page 29 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

⁷ Page 29 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

Section 75 category	Details of evidence/information
Disability	<p>Of the 3,999 children looked after at 31 March 2024⁸:</p> <p>14% were recorded as having a disability</p> <p>Over half (54%) of these children and young people had autism or ADHD, while a further 30% had a learning disability as their main disability.</p> <p>Disability was more prevalent in the male population with 16% of males having a disability recorded compared to 11% of females</p>
Dependants	<p>Of children and young people who had been in care for 12 months or longer at 30 September 2023, 5 young people had a dependent children⁹.</p>

At 31 March 2024¹⁰, there were 2,639 foster carers registered with HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland and were approved for a total of 3,639 places. 254 carers registered with one of the four independent fostering agencies operating on a not-for-profit basis in Northern Ireland; and 481 specialist foster carers (Fee Paid Carers) registered to provide care only to children with a disability—these carers are not available to care for the wider population of children who are looked after. In addition, 326 carers were in the process of being assessed as kinship carers and had children placed with them under the provisions for the immediate or emergency placement of children with family members.

The approval of new foster carers is linked with the matching and placement of a child/ children. Therefore, it is currently not possible to report on the number of new approved foster carers, only the number of assessments completed of which 451 fostering assessments were completed during the year 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024.

Of the 2,639 Trust-registered foster carers, 355 also provided a placement under the Going the Extra Mile (GEM) Scheme. This scheme aims to promote continuity and stability of living arrangements by enabling care leavers to continue living with their foster carers up to the age of 21.

1.6 Needs, experiences, and priorities

⁸ Page 32 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

⁹ Page 14 [Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2022/23](#)

¹⁰ Page 51 [Children's social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

Taking into account the information referred to above, what are the different needs, experiences and priorities of each of the following categories, in relation to the particular policy/decision?

Specify details for each of the Section 75 categories

Section 75 category	Details of needs/experiences/priorities
Religious belief	Religious Beliefs of any child in care and any potential foster parent shall be given due consideration when making arrangements for a placement. Fostering services and foster parents will anticipate and where possible support the needs of children that relate to their religious background, while working in partnership with parents or other sources of specialist advice. Religious beliefs and practices will be accommodated by foster parents and fostering services in a respectful and positive manner, and opportunities will be identified to celebrate traditions that promote a sense of identity and belonging.
Political opinion	The cultural or linguistic background of any child in care and any potential foster parent shall be given due consideration when making arrangements for a placement and the needs of the child will be respectively supported.
Racial group	The racial origin and cultural and linguistic background of any child in care and any potential foster parent shall be given due consideration when making arrangements for a placement and the needs of the child will be respectively supported.
Age	The age of the child and the foster carer is taken into consideration when identifying the most suitable foster placement for a child. Fostering services will provide the necessary support to foster parents to enable them to care for the child, in a manner appropriate to the child's age and circumstances.
Marital status	N/A
Sexual orientation	Sexual orientation of a child is taken into consideration when placing that child in foster care. This is a principle that will underpin the Fostering Standards in that foster parents are supported by the fostering service to help children to promote positive sexual health

Section 75 category	Details of needs/experiences/priorities
	and identity, in a manner appropriate to the child's age and circumstances.
Men and women generally	N/A
Disability	Consideration of the needs of children and foster parents will include consideration of any disabilities if relevant. The fostering service will ensure that children who have neurodevelopmental, health, learning, communication or language needs and those with a disability have access to support and reasonable adjustments, including communication tools, so that they can be fully included in all aspects of everyday life in their foster home and to address inequalities they may have experienced.
Dependants	<p>N/A - Of children and young people who had been in care for 12 months or longer at 30 September 2023, 5 young people had a dependent children¹¹.</p> <p>Foster parents who have other dependants may have different needs to those without. The fostering assessment takes those other dependants into account.</p>

Part 2. Screening questions

2.1 What is the likely impact on equality of opportunity for those affected by this policy, for each of the Section 75 equality categories? minor/major/none

¹¹ Page 14 [Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2022/23](#)

Section 75 category	Details of policy impact	Level of impact? minor/major/none
Religious belief	Children in foster care and foster carers have their belief taken into account.	Minor – positive
Political opinion	Children in foster care and foster carers have their cultural identity taken into account.	Minor - positive
Racial group	Children in foster care and foster carers have their racial origin taken into account.	Minor - positive
Age	Children in foster care and foster carers have their age taken into account.	Minor - positive
Marital status	N/A	
Sexual orientation	Sexual orientation of a child is taken into consideration when placing that child in foster care.	Minor - positive
Men and women generally	N/A	
Disability	The needs of children and foster parents will include consideration of any disabilities.	Minor - Positive
Dependants	Foster parents with other dependants – this is taken into account when placing foster children.	Minor - Positive

2.2 Are there opportunities to better promote equality of opportunity for people within the Section 75 equalities categories?

Section 75 category	If Yes , provide details	If No , provide reasons
Religious belief		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.
Political opinion		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.
Racial group		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.
Age		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.
Marital status		Not a factor.
Sexual orientation		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.
Men and women generally		Not a factor.
Disability		Already taken into account in the development of the

Section 75 category	If Yes , provide details	If No , provide reasons
		Fostering Service Minimum Standards
Dependants		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.

2.3 To what extent is the policy likely to impact on good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group? minor/major/none

Good relations category	Details of policy impact	Level of impact minor/major/none
Religious belief	Standard 7 The intrinsic worth of each child in foster care is valued and promoted - Equality and inclusion are promoted and inequalities are challenged	Minor – positive
Political opinion	Standard 7 The intrinsic worth of each child in foster care is valued and promoted - Equality and inclusion are promoted and inequalities are challenged	Minor – positive
Racial group	Standard 7 The intrinsic worth of each child in foster care is valued and promoted - Equality and inclusion are promoted and inequalities are challenged	Minor – positive

2.4 Are there opportunities to better promote good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group?

Good relations category	If Yes , provide details	If No , provide reasons
Religious belief		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.
Political opinion		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.
Racial group		Already taken into account in the development of the Fostering Service Minimum Standards.

2.5 Additional considerations

Multiple identity

Generally speaking, people can fall into more than one Section 75 category.

Taking this into consideration, are there any potential impacts of the policy/decision on people with multiple identities?

(For example; disabled minority ethnic people; disabled women; young Protestant men; and young lesbians, gay and bisexual people).

No evidence to suggest any impact on multiple identities

Provide details of data on the impact of the policy on people with multiple identities. Specify relevant Section 75 categories concerned.

N/A

2.6 Was the original policy / decision changed in any way to address any adverse impacts identified either through the screening process or from consultation feedback. If so please provide details.

The original decision to introduce the Minimum Standards has not been changed.

A working group was established to include relevant stakeholders to work collaboratively in the development of the Minimum Standards. During this process, engagement took place with wider groups of foster parents and foster children during the development of the standards; this was facilitated by The Fostering Network. Further engagement with care experienced children in care will take place during the consultation period which will enhance and inform the final version of the minimum standards.

Part 3. Screening decision

3.1 Would you summarise the impact of the policy as; No Impact/ Minor Impact/ Major Impact?

Minor = Consider mitigation (3.4 – 3.5)

3.2 Do you consider that this policy/ decision needs to be subjected to a full equality impact assessment?

No screened out

3.3 Please explain your reason.

Any impact on Section 75 groupings is positive and applies equally to all within those groupings.

3.4 Mitigation

When the public authority concludes that the likely impact is 'minor' and an equality impact assessment is not to be conducted, the public authority may consider mitigation to lessen the severity of any equality impact, or the introduction of an alternative policy to better promote equality of opportunity or good relations.

Can the policy/decision be amended or changed or an alternative policy introduced to better promote equality of opportunity and/or good relations?

No – the needs of Section 75 categories are considered and taken in account where relevant

If so, give the reasons to support your decision, together with the proposed changes/amendments or alternative policy.

3.5 Timetabling and prioritising

Factors to be considered in timetabling and prioritising policies for equality impact assessment.

If the policy has been ‘**screened in**’ for equality impact assessment, then please answer the following questions to determine its priority for timetabling the equality impact assessment.

On a scale of 1-3, with 1 being the lowest priority and 3 being the highest, assess the policy in terms of its priority for equality impact assessment.

Priority criterion	Rating (1-3)
Effect on equality of opportunity and good relations	
Social need	
Effect on people’s daily lives	
Relevance to a public authority’s functions	

Note: The Total Rating Score should be used to prioritise the policy in rank order with other policies screened in for equality impact assessment. This list of priorities will assist the public authority in timetabling. Details of the Public Authority’s Equality Impact Assessment Timetable should be included in the quarterly Screening Report.

Is the policy affected by timetables established by other relevant public authorities?

If yes, please provide details.

Part 4. Monitoring

Monitoring is an important part of policy development and implementation. Through monitoring it is possible to assess the impacts of the policy / decision both beneficial and adverse.

4.1 Please detail how you will monitor the effect of the policy / decision?

There is already significant data collection in respect of fostering and this will continue. In addition, RQIA will register monitor and carry out inspections on fostering Agencies. It is also intended that the Northern Ireland Fostering Services Minimum Standards will be reviewed within three years of being introduced, and at least every five years thereafter.

4.2 What data will you collect in the future in order to monitor the effect of the policy / decision?

Data will continue to be collected and monitored on the number of foster carers approved and placements provided.

Please note: - *For the purposes of the annual progress report to the Equality Commission you may later be asked about the monitoring you have done in relation to this policy and whether that has identified any Equality issues.*

Part 5. Disability Duties

5.1 Does the policy/decision in any way promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and/or encourage their participation in public life?

Consideration of the needs of children and foster parents will include consideration of any disabilities if relevant.

5.2 Is there an opportunity to better promote positive attitudes towards disabled people or encourage their participation in public life by making changes to the policy/decision or introducing additional measures?

None identified

Part 6. Human Rights

6.1 Please complete the table below to indicate whether the policy / decision affects anyone's Human Rights?

ARTICLE	POSITIVE IMPACT	NEGATIVE IMPACT = human right interfered with or restricted	NEUTRAL IMPACT
Article 2 – Right to life	✓		
Article 3 – Right to freedom from torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment	✓		
Article 4 – Right to freedom from slavery, servitude & forced or compulsory labour	✓		
Article 5 – Right to liberty & security of person	✓		
Article 6 – Right to a fair & public trial within a reasonable time			✓
Article 7 – Right to freedom from retrospective criminal law & no punishment without law.			✓
Article 8 – Right to respect for private & family life, home and correspondence.	✓		
Article 9 – Right to freedom of thought, conscience & religion	✓		
Article 10 – Right to freedom of expression	✓		
Article 11 – Right to freedom of assembly & association	✓		
Article 12 – Right to marry & found a family			✓
Article 14 – Prohibition of discrimination in the enjoyment of the convention rights	✓		

1 st protocol Article 1 – Right to a peaceful enjoyment of possessions & protection of property	✓		
1 st protocol Article 2 – Right of access to education	✓		

6.2 If you have identified a likely negative impact who is affected and how?

At this stage we would recommend that you consult with your line manager to determine whether to seek legal advice and to refer to Human Rights Guidance to consider:

- whether there is a law which allows you to interfere with or restrict rights*
- whether this interference or restriction is necessary and proportionate*
- what action would be required to reduce the level of interference or restriction in order to comply with the Human Rights Act (1998).*

Not applicable

6.3 Outline any actions which could be taken to promote or raise awareness of human rights or to ensure compliance with the legislation in relation to the policy/decision.

Not applicable

Part 7 - Approval and authorisation

Screened by:	Position/Job Title	Date
Karen Brown	SO	11/04/2025
Checked by:		
Ursua Mills	DP	23/04/2025
Approved by:		
Stefani Millar	G7	22/05/2025
Copied to EHRU:		

The Screening Template is 'signed off' and approved by a senior manager responsible for the policy (at least Grade 7), made easily accessible on the public authority's website as soon as possible following completion and made available on request.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION TO INFORM THE ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT TO THE EQUALITY COMMISSION

(PLEASE NOTE : THIS IS NOT PART OF THE SCREENING TEMPLATE BUT MUST BE COMPLETED AND RETURNED WITH THE SCREENING)

1. Please provide details of any measures taken to enhance the level of engagement with individuals and representative groups. Please include any use of the Equality Commissions guidance on consulting with and involving children and young people.

A working group was established to collaboratively develop draft minimum standards for the provision of fostering services in Northern Ireland, which reflect the relevant policies and legislation, as well as the views of those with direct experience of foster care.

Membership of the working group included the following stakeholders:

- Department of Health officials from Looked After Children and Adoption Policy Unit, and from Strategic Planning & Performance Group
- HSC Trust representatives
- Fostering agency representatives
- Service Users or their representatives, to include children and young people and foster carers
- Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority representatives
- Foster parents

The Department also undertook engagement with wider groups of foster parents and foster children during the development of the standards; this was facilitated by The Fostering Network through in-person consultation events, online video calls and by circulating and collating responses to a survey to foster parents and care experienced children and young people.

2. In developing this policy / decision were any changes made as a result of equality issues raised during :
 - (a) pre-consultation / engagement; NO
 - (b) formal consultation; NO
 - (c) the screening process; and/or NO
 - (d) monitoring / research findings. NO

If so, please provide a brief summary including how the issue was identified, what changes were made, and what will be the expected outcomes / impacts for those effected.

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3. Does this policy / decision include any measure(s) to improve access to services including the provision of information in accessible formats? If so please provide a short summary.

Yes, the Minimum Standards states that the fostering service provides each child living in foster care with a guide to its services (a Children's Guide) at the point of placement, in a manner appropriate to their age and circumstances. Where a child requires it, this is available through suitable alternative methods of communication, e.g., Makaton, pictures, tape recording, translation into another language. The fostering service explains the content of its Children's Guide to each child.

The Minimum Standards also states that the fostering service provides foster parents with information and advice, either a handbook or electronic resources, which includes at a minimum policies and/or procedures relating to financial matters (including allowances, fees and expenses); legal issues; breaks from caring; management of complaints, concerns or allegations; support including emotional support, advocacy and representation arrangements including mediation between foster parents and the fostering service; complaints procedures; and requirements around insurance. This should also include contact details such as an email address and phone number for the fostering service. The fostering service reviews, and if appropriate updates, the information regularly.

Thank you for your co-operation.
Equality and Human Rights Unit.