

## **GUIDE FOR COMPILATION OF A SOCIAL REPORT IN CONJUNCTION WITH AN ADOPTION APPLICATION**

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Royal Ministry of Children and Family Affairs<sup>1</sup>

### **I INTRODUCTION**

This guide must be used when compiling a social report in conjunction with an adoption application. A social report must be prepared both when applying for advance approval of the adoption of a child from abroad, and when registering as an applicant for adoption of a Norwegian child. If parallel applications are made, the applicants must be assessed both for adoption of a Norwegian child and for adoption of a child from abroad.

Form Q-0297, *Social report in conjunction with an adoption application*, must be used in the assessment. This can be downloaded electronically from the website of the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs at [www.bufetat.no](http://www.bufetat.no). The form outlines the topics that must be evaluated in the assessment, and these are described in greater detail in this guide. It is therefore essential that the person who prepares the social report makes active use of the guide during the entire process.

The guide is intended to be of help when completing form Q-0297 - *Social report in conjunction with an adoption application*. In addition it will be of assistance in the conversations the caseworker must conduct with adoptive applicants.

Processing of adoption applications by the municipalities must be based on Circular Q-1045 issued by the former Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (*now: The Ministry of Children and Equality*). This provides guidelines for the processing of applications for Norwegian and intercountry adoptions and focuses particularly on appraisal in the case of Norwegian adoptions. In addition Circular Q-0972 on intercountry adoption, which gives guidelines for the study and approval of adoptive homes, establishes a more specific framework for the assessment of applicants.

Norwegian residents who wish to adopt a child from a foreign country must obtain advance approval from the Norwegian authorities. The Regional Offices for Children, Youth and Family affairs are responsible for granting advance approvals. Usually the authorities in the child's country of origin are responsible for selecting adoptive parents for the individual child. The general rule is that advance approval for the adoption of a child from a foreign country is only granted if the adoption is mediated via an accredited adoption organisation. At present, three organisations are accredited:

- \* Adopsjonsforum
- \* InorAdopt
- \* Verdens Barn (Children of the World – Norway)

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<sup>1</sup> Made available in English by The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, June 2008

The Professional Board for Adoption Cases is responsible for selecting adoptive parents for children in Norway in cases in which the biological parents consent to the adoption. The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs acts as the Secretariat for the Board. The adoption application and accompanying documents, including the social report, are registered in a central adoption record. The register is kept by the Secretariat. The Secretariat also has responsibility for gathering information about the biological parents and the child.

In the case of intercountry adoptions, the social report forms an important basis for advance approval of the adoption by the Regional office of a child from abroad. Furthermore, the social report must be suitable for use by the authorities in the child's country of origin in their processing of the adoption case. In adoption of a Norwegian child the social report is the basis for the decision of the Professional Board for Adoption Cases on the choice of adoptive parents.

The assessment process itself is also aimed at providing the applicants with knowledge about what adopting a child actually entails so that they are better able to evaluate whether adoption is the best course of action for them.

The processing of the application begins when the applicants approach their local municipality to request that a social report be compiled. The municipality is responsible for assessing the applicants and making recommendations. When the case has been processed, the municipality must submit the application and required accompanying documents to the Regional Office for Children, Youth and Family affairs.

If an application for adoption is made at a later stage, a new and comprehensive social report must be compiled. The guidelines indicate that case-processing times can be shortened somewhat by using the information given in the earlier social report.

The term "applicants" is used throughout the guide. However, it should be noted that the current guidelines also allow for adoption by single persons.

## **II CHILDREN WHO ARE FREED FOR ADOPTION**

Statistics reveal that the number of children who are adopted has remained relatively stable. The largest proportion is constituted by children adopted from abroad. Just over 600 children are adopted from abroad every year. The main countries of origin are South Korea, Colombia and China.

According to the statistics, very few children are adopted in Norway on an annual basis under the regulations on domestic adoption whereby the biological parents must consent to the adoption. In some years this has amounted to almost 20 children, but normally there are far less than this. Those who wish to be registered as applicants for the adoption of Norwegian children should be aware that the application has little chance of success. Most children who have been adopted from abroad in recent years have been below the age of three at the time of adoption, with the majority being in the age group from one to two years. In the case of children adopted in Norway in accordance with the above-mentioned regulations on national adoption, the children are mostly very young at the time of adoption, sometimes only a few months old.

Many different circumstances may lead to adoption. However, all adoptive children have in common that they have experienced at least one loss – the loss of their biological parents.

No survey has been carried out to establish what characterises cases in which biological parents in Norway request help to surrender their child for adoption. Nevertheless, it has been reported that there may be a very wide range of reasons why parents choose adoption. The cases involve both young girls and adult women, some of whom are employed or studying. Most of the mothers are single. In a number of cases one or both of the parents may have a background from another country. In a very few cases, serious issues such as psychiatric problems or rape may be part of the picture.

In such cases the parents themselves contact the authorities to request help to give the child up for adoption. Usually the mother contacts the Secretariat for the Professional Board for Adoption Cases, but in some cases the public body contacted by the mother/parents – for example, the general practitioner, midwife, family advisory office or a voluntary anti-abortion organisation – may get in touch. Often the Secretariat is informed of the prospective adoption some time before the birth of the child. However, the Secretariat may also be contacted by the maternity clinic after the birth of the child.

The adoption of a child will always entail a number of uncertain factors that may make different demands on adoptive parents than on biological parents.

In contrast to the adoption of Norwegian children, it is often the case with intercountry adoption that little is known of the individual child's background. Most parents who have adopted children from abroad must take into consideration the fact that earlier experiences may to some extent mark the child for many years. The child may also prove to have more serious disorders than known in the country of origin at the time of adoption.

Many of the children from abroad who are given up for adoption are under-stimulated and under-nourished when they come to their adoptive parents. Some have experienced physical and mental abuse. Others have experienced a number of placements and have lived in institutions for short or long periods of time.

Many children are given up for adoption because the parents have no other choice. Often the father of the child is not registered and the mother makes the decision alone. The mothers may be young, and the pregnancy the result of incest, rape or prostitution, or they may be mothers who have suddenly found themselves in a very difficult life situation who see no solution other than to give up one or more children for adoption.

In some cultures it is not accepted that a mother surrenders a child for adoption. The child may therefore have been delivered anonymously to a public institution or authority in the expectation that they will look after the child. Thus no information will be available about the child's origin.

In other cases the national child care authorities will take responsibility for the child. This may apply to cases where the parents abandon the child for different reasons, for instance, in order to procure a better financial basis for the family. Other cases may involve such serious abuse that the authorities intervene. For various reasons the child may also be placed in a children's home and have little or no contact with its parents. These children may be

somewhat older when the authorities revoke the parents' parental rights and free the children for adoption.

Circular Q-0972 on intercountry adoption with guidelines for the study and approval of adoptive homes takes into account that there are many uncertain factors in the adoption of children from abroad, and that the challenges posed may be very different and greater than in the case of biological children or the adoption of Norwegian children. In light of this, it is essential that the caseworker discusses in depth with applicants the uncertain factors that may apply during adoption as well as the particular challenges that may arise in intercountry adoption. It is assumed that applicants who have obtained advance approval fulfil the general requirements set by the authorities.

### **III REVIEW**

#### **1 General remarks**

The social report consists of two main sections – Factual Information and Assessment. The Factual Information section must be approved and signed by the applicants. In the second part of the report, the caseworker's assessment of the applicants and their suitability as adoptive parents must be presented.

If parallel applications have been made, applicants must be assessed both with regard to the adoption of a Norwegian child and a child from abroad. This means that two comprehensive social reports must be prepared in such cases – one report to be submitted to the Professional Board for Adoption Cases in the case of the placement of a Norwegian child and another report to be used in the processing of the application for advance approval in the case of the adoption of a child from abroad. The reason for this is that the Professional Board for Adoption Cases requires information that is unnecessary for the authorities in the country of origin in their processing of the case. For the most part, the social reports will be based on the same factual information about the applicants, cf. 3.11.

The social report must give the most complete and detailed picture of the applicants possible. The language used must be straightforward and precise in order to be able to distinguish between what is important and what is not important.

The caseworker must keep in mind that in the case of intercountry adoption the description of the applicants and the formulations used in the social report will be translated and interpreted by the authorities in other countries. Therefore, formulations that might be misunderstood because of cultural differences must be avoided.

In some cases the social report will give a negative recommendation regarding the suitability of the applicants. Nevertheless, in cases involving the adoption of a Norwegian child the application must be submitted to the Secretariat for the Professional Board for Adoption Cases for registration in the central adoption record. The same applies to applications for advance approval of intercountry adoption, but then the application is submitted to the Regional Office for Children, Youth and Family affairs for processing.

If advance approval for adoption has been granted either by the Regional office for Children, Youth and Family affairs or following a complaint to the Norwegian Directorate for Children,

Youth and Family Affairs, and the municipality has given a negative recommendation, it is assumed that the original report will be sent to the country of origin. This underscores the necessity of an in-depth assessment by the municipality. The municipality must not make any changes in the social report after advance approval for adoption has been granted even though the adoption organisations request this. In such cases the Regional Office will often prepare a more detailed justification for their decision that the authorities in the country of origin can refer to. If the Directorate reaches a different conclusion in the case of an appeal than the Regional office, the decision will contain the reasons for this.

The best interests of the child must be the starting point when carrying out an adoption. The purpose of adoption is to ensure a permanent and harmonious home for the child. Adoption entails the establishment of a life-long relationship between the child and the adoptive parents whereby all legal ties to the child's biological parents are broken. Therefore, it is assumed that the adoptive parents will be able to cope with any problems arising during the different phases of childhood and adolescence. The work invested in the social report and the assessment of applicants is thus of major significance for the child's future.

## **2 Conducting the interview**

### **2.1 The role of the caseworker**

When unable to conceive a child, it is natural to look for other ways of obtaining a longed-for child. Initially it is not uncommon for applicants to regard their plans for adoption as private and to consider the intervention of the public authorities as completely unnecessary. On occasion applicants wish to speed up the assessment because they see it as a pure formality.

The person who is to carry out the assessment must always keep in mind that issues which are very personal and sensitive for the applicants must be touched on. This may apply to questions that are difficult to discuss with a representative of the authorities. Consequently, the caseworker must emphasise that the basic premise of the work is to safeguard the unknown child.

The child's right to a suitable family must be the centre of focus. Nevertheless, the applicants must also be supported during the assessment. The combination of these two roles – safeguarding the unknown child while acting as a conversation partner for the family that wishes to adopt - makes great demands on the caseworker. It is essential that the person who is responsible for the assessment is knowledgeable about adoption.

The assessment process itself is also intended to be a preparation for the applicants, who are given the opportunity to talk to a neutral party about what adopting a child entails. During this process, therefore, the applicants should acquire knowledge and information about a somewhat different kind of parenthood.

People are influenced by personal beliefs, experiences and values. The caseworker's own attitudes to children and infertility as well as to adoption may be of significance for the assessment work and cooperation with the applicants. It is therefore of key importance that the caseworker is fully aware of his/her own attitude to these questions. Frequently it will be of great value to confer with colleagues and to prepare the social report together with at least one other person. Caseworkers can contact the Regional Office for Children, Youth and Family affairs for advice and further discussion.

## **2.2 Further information about the interview**

The arrangements for the interview will be made when the municipality has received all the necessary references and accompanying documents.

Several interviews should be carried out, and at least one of them should take place in the home of the applicants. It is important that the caseworker gains an impression of the child's prospective future home and the atmosphere there. In the case of a married couple who have applied for adoption, both husband and wife must be present. The caseworker must assume that the spouses are completely open with each other and can answer all questions together. The manner in which the applicants react to the questions may reflect their relationship to each other. In addition, it may be natural to have individual conversations with each of the spouses separately if the caseworker finds this necessary.

Adequate time must be allowed since the conversation requires a calm atmosphere and in-depth discussion, and the topics can be emotionally challenging for some individuals. It is vital that the caseworker attaches importance to creating an atmosphere where the applicants feel confident enough to talk about their thoughts and feelings about adopting a child.

If the applicants have any children, they should be present during parts of the interviews, so that the caseworker can form an impression of the overall family situation and whether the children in the family are eager to welcome new siblings. It is also important to form an impression of the children who are already in the family.

Nevertheless, the first in-depth interview should be conducted with the applicants on their own. This results in a more relaxed atmosphere and freedom to ask and answer very personal questions. Only when the caseworker has formed a picture of the applicants should their children be brought into the conversations.

All the topics indicated on the social report form must be taken up with the applicants and must be commented on in the assessment. Consequently, during the conversation with the applicants it may be natural to use this form as a template. Nevertheless, this does not preclude conducting the interview as a freer conversation. It may be natural to go back to several of the items later. Often there may be a progression and perhaps a change in attitude in the course of the interview. The applicants' suitability must be assessed in the second part of the social report, as it appears when the review has been completed.

Some time must pass between the interviews since this type of conversation almost always triggers other lines of questioning that may need to be processed. The applicants may be at different stages in the process when they contact the municipality. Some are at the starting phase and primarily need advice and guidance. Others are well informed about what adoption involves and have dealt with their childlessness fairly well. The caseworker may also meet applicants who have such great problems in accepting their situation that it is natural to recommend that they seek professional help before continuing with the adoption process.

The manner in which the questions are asked is of great importance. One-sided question-and-answer conversations should be avoided since this probably does not give a balanced picture of the applicants. Moreover, it is important to establish an atmosphere that allows both spouses to give their opinions.

Questions such as, “Have you experienced problems in your marriage?” or “Have you or your family any prejudices with regard to the adoption of a child with a different ethnic background?” are often answered by a quick “No” because of a fear that an honest answer may harm the application. Questions such as “What have you struggled with in your marriage?” and “What prejudices do you and your family have?” convey an acceptance of its being natural to have difficulties and opposing views, etc. It should be stressed that there are no right or wrong answers.

The caseworker must find an appropriate approach. The questions must vary in tune with what appears natural or necessary in the specific situation. A good interviewer must have the ability to show openness, genuine curiosity and interest in the applicants’ lives. The interviewer must set aside sufficient time and return to key topics when necessary. It is important to bring out the applicants’ life history and experiences for better or worse. Therefore, the aim is not to make all interviews the same. The aim is rather to facilitate a good interaction with applicants so that they can talk freely about themselves, their daily life and their experiences. A decisive factor for the caseworker’s assessment of the applicants must be the manner in which they have dealt with difficulties and adversity. Applicants who have risen to challenges will in many cases be better equipped to cope with the task of becoming parents.

### **3 The various questions to be elucidated in the social report**

#### **3.0 Family circumstances**

Under this point, the date that the marriage was entered into must be noted. The dates of any previous marriages and/or periods of cohabitation should be included.

The name, gender and age of any children in the family must be given. Furthermore, details must be provided as to whether the child is a biological child, an adopted child (the date of the adoption must be stated) or a foster child (the date of the child’s arrival in the family must be given).

#### **3.1 The applicants’ childhood and adolescence, family circumstances, work experience, interests and record of conduct**

The applicants’ childhood and adolescence as well as family circumstances must be accounted for in 3.1. In addition, the applicants’ education, work experience, interests and record of conduct must be clarified.

It is important that the applicants describe how they experienced their childhood and adolescence, including what kind of relationship their parents had to each other and to their children. Moreover, the relationship between the applicants and their siblings, if any, must be outlined. A description should be given of the atmosphere in the home, whether it was friendly and outgoing or inward-looking, what the parents were interested in and how they influenced their children. If it is evident that there have been serious difficulties in the applicants’ childhood and adolescence or special life circumstances, these should be detailed further. It should also be indicated how this information may affect the applicants’ suitability as prospective adopters.

The applicants' immediate family should be described briefly. How big is the family? How old are the applicants' siblings (if any)? What kind of contact is there between them and how frequent is this?

If the applicants already have children, it must be made clear whether these are joint children, children of one spouse from a former marriage or relationship, adoptive children or foster children and whether or not they live at home. If either of the applicants has parental responsibility or access rights to children who do not live with him/her, this must be stated. Similarly, if either of the applicants has children for whom he/she does not have parental responsibility or access rights, this must be reported.

The education and work experience of the applicants can be described briefly. The most recent place of work must be indicated, but otherwise it is sufficient to mention the areas of work that the applicants have experience in. Mention should also be made of whether the applicants enjoy their work.

If the applicants are members of a religious or philosophical community, a more detailed account should be given of how this affects the applicants' lives and everyday routines.

The applicants' interests must also be described. What do they do in their leisure time? What kind of social life do they have? When talking about the applicants' leisure time, it is easy to bring up the applicants' expectations of the parental role and their commitment to adopting a child.

If there are annotations on the police certificate of good conduct, it should be stated whether this information may affect the applicants' suitability to adopt a child and if so, how.

### **3.2 Financial situation**

Information on the applicants' gross income in the previous year, monthly salary, bank deposits and debt must be given in both the application form and the social report. The applicants must submit a tax certificate for the previous year.

It is not necessary to provide a detailed financial overview, but the caseworker must be sure that income and expenditure balance. The applicants' financial situation must be sound enough to give the children a secure childhood and adolescence. Therefore, the report must reveal whether the family's financial situation can be said to be stable.

If either of the applicants is unemployed, it must be shown how this affects the family both socially and financially. Involuntary unemployment can place a heavy burden on the family. Therefore, the effect of unemployment on the family both with regard to mental health and familial relationships should be clarified. How do applicants view the situation in terms of work prospects and sound finances?

### **3.3 Residential conditions and childhood environment**

The residential conditions of applicants are not subject to any special requirements. Nevertheless, it should be ascertained whether the applicants have a housing situation that is secure enough to warrant welcoming an adoptive child.

Consequently, the social report should contain a short description of the kind of housing, the floor space, the environment and opportunities for play.

What opportunities for play does the home offer? Where is the child to sleep? A child from abroad who has lived in a children's home may not be able to sleep alone in a room at the start. Perhaps the child has become used to sleeping on the floor close to many other people. In this connection the conversation may turn to the child's basic needs, such as the need for sleep, food, development opportunities, bodily contact and a feeling of security.

When describing the residential conditions, the neighbourhood enters into the picture. For example, mention should be made of access to playgrounds and playmates in the vicinity as well as proximity to the outdoors and opportunities for leisure time activities for different age groups.

### **3.4 Social environment**

The applicants' immediate social circle must also be described. Who forms part of the social circle (family and friends)? Where do they live? Do they have children? What is the nature of the contact and how frequent is it? In addition, mention should be made of whether the applicants have friends and/or relatives who also have children, and if any of them have experience with adoption.

Has the question of adoption been discussed with family and friends and what attitude do they have? Do the applicants have a good relationship with neighbours? In the case of illness or any other situation affecting the parents that results in a need for support, are there any relatives or anyone else who could be there for the child?

In the case of intercountry adoption applications, it should be noted whether the applicants know families with children adopted from abroad. The child must be included in a wider circle than the core family. The attitude of the rest of the family to intercountry adoption, their knowledge of people with a different ethnic background and their attitude towards them are therefore important.

The applicants' parents often need some time to get used to the idea that a child from a foreign country may become part of the family. It is important that they are informed of this at the earliest stage possible and that they are given the opportunity to prepare themselves in the same way as the applicants. Every child who is adopted should be wanted and longed for by others in addition to the prospective parents.

Also of significance are the attitudes in the neighbourhood, especially in the case of children whose appearance stands out in the Norwegian context. In connection with the assessment the applicants must be encouraged to talk about how the family may be affected by the prejudices and negative attitudes that they may meet in the surrounding environment and how best to meet and come to terms with these.

### *Single applicants*

In the case of single applicants, it is extremely important to focus on the description of the applicant's social network. Single parents will have fewer opportunities for help, for example in connection with disturbed nights with little sleep, than a married couple. Nor will there be the same opportunities to share ordinary joys and anxieties with someone who is also responsible for the child. Thus, the attitude and willingness of people in the immediate environment to help with child minding etc. is of major significance.

Therefore, it must be clear how the applicant intends to organise everyday life with the child, taking into account the work situation, finances, housing, leisure activities, network, etc. Details must also be provided on whether there are other persons close to the child who are prepared to step in, for example, if the parent falls ill or for some other reason cannot look after the child for a period of time. How much assistance can the applicant realistically expect to receive?

Natural contact with people of both sexes is also of importance for the child's development of identity. How will the applicant ensure that the child has good role models and natural contact with people of both sexes during childhood and adolescence? Consequently, the requirements as to flexibility, empathy and patience are very stringent in the case of a single person who alone must have the energy to look after a child who perhaps has special needs.

In the case of intercountry adoption, the applicant should be informed that only a small number of countries of origin place adoptive children with a single person. Most choose married couples for their children when possible.

## **3.5 Health**

Under this item in the social report the mental and physical health of the applicants must be described.

The state of health will be primarily documented by a medical report and personal health statements. If the applicants have or have had health problems, the effect of these on the applicants' daily life must be outlined as well as the significance such health problems will have in the future for their ability to care for a child. The background and situation of an adoptive child indicates that placing the child with families where illness entails that the adoptive parents may have problems meeting the child's need for closeness and care should be avoided.

If either of the applicants has had a serious illness that has been treated successfully, the guidelines stipulate that a symptom-free period may be required as the circumstances indicate.

Similarly in the case of most chronic disorders, the prognosis may be the deciding factor for whether applicants are to be given advance approval or authorisation to adopt. The applicants themselves are perhaps not affected by their illness or may not believe that the illness affects their ability to look after a child. This may be true in many cases, but medical knowledge of the illness may indicate that adoption cannot be recommended because the prognosis is uncertain or is so unfavourable that the applicant's ability to function as a parent may be affected within a few years.

If one of the applicants has or has had mental problems, an account must be given of what treatment the applicant has received or is receiving and how satisfied the applicants are with this treatment. It must be made clear how much energy the applicants have and how certain they are that they can care for a child as well as themselves in the long-term.

An evaluation must always be made of whether additional information must be sought, for example, a statement from a doctor or specialist, or information from the social welfare office if the applicant is disabled, etc. The applicant must always give consent to the gathering of such information.

### **3.6 Marriage and family life**

#### *Description of the marriage*

The relationship between the applicants is a key factor in the assessment of whether they are suited as adoptive parents.

Often a conversation about childlessness, attitudes to child upbringing, circumstances when growing up, and how the practical tasks in the family are divided will provide more information about the relationship in the family than direct questions about the marriage. The applicants' reactions and answers to questions about how conflicts are solved, for example, and how they would describe themselves, etc. must be detailed. Husband and wife should also describe each other.

Furthermore, it is important to bring out how the applicants separately experience the marriage. What in their view functions well and what functions less well? Is there anything they would like to change? How are problems, big or small, solved? If there are any children in the family already, how does family life function with them, etc.?

#### *Description of former marriages/partnerships*

If one or both of the applicants have been married earlier, it is important to elicit how they experienced the previous marriage, the background for the break-up and how it affected them. The manner in which a person copes with a divorce can be indicative of that person's ability to deal with greater problems. The same applies to applicants who have experienced a break-up after a long-term period of cohabitation.

#### *Description of the applicants' own children – particularly in the case of adoptive children*

If there are already children in the family, this has great significance for the environment during the prospective adoptee's childhood and adolescence.

It is of importance to describe the situation of any children the applicants already have. Information about the individual child's health, development, interests, relationship with parents, siblings and the surrounding environment must be elucidated in the social report. Moreover, the child's attitude towards acquiring an adoptive brother or sister must also be indicated. In this connection it may be natural to talk to the child. Sometimes it may be necessary to gather information from kindergarten or school. The consent of the applicants is required for such contact.

If there is already an adoptive child in the family, special focus must be directed towards describing how the child experiences the family. How has the child adapted and developed? It

is essential to provide details of how the bonding process between the child and the applicants has functioned. The child's relationships with siblings and the rest of the family as well as the immediate surroundings must also be presented in more detail.

*Families that already have comprehensive care duties*

If the applicants have children with special needs, for example a disabled child or a child with a chronic illness, the effect this has on the family as a whole must be focused on.

In these cases it is important that the social report contains more detailed information about the child. In particular, this applies to the functioning of the child, the need for special care both at home and outside the home, and what opportunities for treatment, training and assistance are available in the applicants' place of residence that they can make use of. The child's future opportunities for development must be described. Emphasis should also be placed on bringing out how the applicants intend to cope with the tasks involved in caring for a new child in the family. The parents' total capacity must be assessed in relation to the considerable care tasks they already have.

If the applicants have foster children, information must be provided as to whether the municipality responsible for care services is aware that the applicants have started an adoption process. The future plans that the municipality has drawn up for the foster child must also be reported.

*Description of children who do not live with the applicants*

Information about children from earlier relationships or marriages who do not live with the applicants is also of significance. It is important to elicit the reason why they do not live with the applicant, what the contact between them is like, and whether agreements, financial and otherwise, have been kept. How does cooperation with the other parent regarding visiting arrangements with the child or children function?

Valuable information can also be provided by applicants' relationships with grown-up children. Even though they do not live with the applicants, they will usually be a natural part of the adoptive child's immediate environment.

*Attitudes to alcohol and drugs*

This is a difficult question, but the caseworker should be able to form a picture of the applicants' relations to alcohol and use of medication through questions about lifestyle and health. If the applicants do not have any particular problems with abuse, it is sufficient to note this without providing more details of use in the social report.

### **3.7 Motivation for adoption**

A central question is the reason why the couple wishes to adopt a child. It may therefore be natural to ask this question at the start of the conversations about adoption. The applicants should not only explain the underlying motivation but also be given the opportunity to scrutinise and process this motivation in the discussions with the caseworker.

The background for the application and the process leading up to the decision to adopt should be outlined. How was the decision to adopt made and when was it made? Was it a difficult decision? Are the applicants able to have their own biological children? Do the applicants

have the same motivation regarding adoption and has the process leading to the decision to adopt been the same for both?

If the application refers to the adoption of a particular child, any special association with the child, for example through kinship or fostering, should be noted. It is important to elicit information about the child's background and present life and care situation as well as the background for the child's need to be placed in a new family by means of adoption. The applicants should be informed that the information they provide will be verified where possible by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, via the Norwegian diplomatic service.

The fact that the applicants for adoption are certain about their decision and motivation is of great significance both for themselves and for the adoptive child who is to become part of the family. It is vital that both parties in the relationship have an individual wish to adopt a child.

A desire for a child may also involve expectations of the child. If the applicants do not have realistic expectations that mirror the child's needs, this may interfere with the development of good relations between the child and the parents in childhood and adolescence. During the conversation the caseworker must listen with sensitivity to establish whether the wish to have a child originates from a hope that this will solve any problems the applicants may have.

Furthermore, it is of importance that the applicants reflect on the question of adoption in a long-term perspective of at least 15 to 20 years. Do the applicants feel that they will have sufficient energy and capacity when the child is growing up? It may be useful, for instance, for the applicants to assess themselves in relation to being responsible for a teenager. How will they deal with teenage children who test their limits?

Another reason why it is necessary to discuss the question of motivation stems from the questions the applicants will be asked by others both before and after the adoptive child arrives. If the parents are confronted with questions and attitudes of a negative character, the fact that they have considered how to tackle such situations can mean a great deal. It is essential to be aware of the basis for their decision about adoption. The parents' attitude to adoption will affect the child's confidence and feeling of security. One day the child may ask the parents why they chose adoption.

When it comes to intercountry adoption, the social report should not focus on the choice of country. What is important is that the applicants reflect on what having a child who looks different implies, regardless of what country they wish to adopt from. However, the choice of country may be a central question in cases where the applicants have very close ties to one particular country and adoption from another country is not of interest.

#### *Involuntary childlessness*

If involuntary childlessness is the motivation for adoption, it is natural to enquire whether the applicants have been screened and received treatment for infertility. What effect has infertility had on their relationship? How did they react when they were told that it was impossible for them to have their own biological children? Which of the applicants first broached the question of adoption? How long did it take for them to agree? Have they had any misgivings about adoption?

Hospitals may have long waiting lists for couples who wish to be screened for infertility. People who apply for adoption may be undergoing treatment for infertility at the same time. The report must include information on whether treatment for fertility is still an option. Depending on the circumstances, information about ongoing treatment for infertility may result in the Regional Office for Children, Youth and Family affairs suspending the application or finding it impossible to give advance approval for adoption. In such cases the Professional Board for Adoption Cases may also conclude that the applicants should not be chosen to parent a Norwegian child.

Many people experience strong grief reactions if in vitro fertilisation is not successful, and they need time to process their disappointment and recognition that there is no possibility of having their own biological children. If the social report recommends that the applicants should be allowed to adopt, the caseworker must be absolutely certain that adoption is what the applicants really want and are prepared for.

Some people have their own biological children but for various reasons are unable to have any more. Others prefer adoption to bringing more children into the world. Such an attitude may express a realistic and positive perspective on humanity but on occasion may be caused by uncertainty or a disintegrating relationship within the marriage. Sometimes the wife is afraid of pregnancy and giving birth and may need professional help to face this fear.

Among the applicants there may also be those who have grown-up biological children. The couple realises that they have sufficient physical and mental resources to care for another child. It is not unusual that among these there are families who are prepared to welcome a child with special needs.

#### *Applicants who already have demanding care tasks*

Occasionally applicants who have one or more children with disabilities or who have a chronic illness wish to adopt. There is no guarantee that the adoptive child is healthy or will develop normally. In other words, the family may end up having to care for another child with special needs. Therefore, it is essential to elucidate the background for the wish to adopt another child. How do the applicants envisage tackling the care duties with yet another child in the family if the adoptive child proves to be in need of extra care? There are huge variations in how people deal with such burdens and how they tackle care duties far in excess of what is normal. Therefore, it is important to describe how the applicants have coped with burdens earlier and how they cope with family life with the care duties they already have.

During the conversation it is important to take up how the applicants feel the adoptive child will experience being part of a family where the parents already have challenging care duties. Is there a danger that non-disabled children must take on greater responsibilities or must make greater allowances for the disabled child than they are capable of? Although there are no right or wrong answers, the reflections of the applicants on this aspect are of great significance – if only as part of the preparation process.

#### *Desire for siblings*

A desire for siblings for children in the family, whether these are adoptive or biological children, is occasionally given as the motivation for the application, and this should also be discussed with the applicants in greater detail.

Usually it is not known at the time of the assessment or when advance approval has been given what child will be placed in the family or what special needs the child may have. As a result, it is essential that the social report contains a description of the children already in the family. How secure do they feel in the family and in relation to their immediate surroundings?

The new child will undoubtedly need a considerable amount of the parents' time. The applicants must therefore have thought through how they believe a child already in the family will tackle the experience of having a new sibling. Applicants must express their opinion on whether this child will be able to share the parents' attention with another child, as siblings must do. Competition for the parents' attention is just as natural for adoptive children as for other children who grow up with their biological siblings.

A child should never be adopted with the intention of solving another child's problems.

#### *Families in grief*

Families who have lost a child sometimes apply for adoption. The application may be the result of a decision that is well-considered and that has matured over time. Grief over a dead child is something that a parent will probably never quite get over. Such grief will probably be processed to a greater or lesser extent. In such cases it is important to realise that people who speak openly of their grief have probably come further in the processing of their grief than those who appear self-certain and carefree. The caseworker should therefore attempt to form an opinion of whether the applicants will be able to regard the new child as a separate individual, with a right to a unique place in the family, and to ascertain that the intention is not to alleviate the loss of another child.

See point 3.11 for applicants who submit parallel applications for the adoption of a Norwegian child and a child from abroad.

### **3.8 Knowledge and experience of children**

The caseworker must elicit what thoughts the applicants have about what adopting a child means for them as a family. Emphasis must be placed on bringing out how applicants have prepared themselves for parenthood. Under this point in the social report a description of what knowledge and experience the applicants have of children and teenagers must be supplied. If the applicants believe that they possess special resources in relation to children, this must be explicitly mentioned.

A deciding factor when assessing an application from a single person is whether this person has special resources in relation to children.

If adopting a child from abroad, it is advisable to have a good understanding of the challenges this may entail. With a child that looks different, the adoptive parents will experience that they may be the focus of others' attention for better or worse, for example, as regards special attitudes towards people of foreign origin. What thoughts do the applicants have about adopting a child whose appearance is different? Have the applicants the strength and assurance required in such situations?

The applicants' views on upbringing must be elucidated. If the applicants have children already, it will be natural to base questions on what they have emphasised in the children's

upbringing and what experience they have gained. If the applicants do not have children, their opinions and thoughts about these questions should emerge.

During the conversation about the parents' role it may be advisable to touch upon the future division of responsibility between the parents, for example, who will stay home from work in different situations when the child is ill, and how they will share parental leave. These questions will test the involvement of both applicants. The adoptive child should not simply be one person's concern.

If the applicants have attended a preparation course for adoption, this should be stated in the social report. It would be natural to take up the various topics covered on the course, especially those that the applicants have had a special interest in.

However, it is important that the caseworker ascertains whether the applicants, regardless of whether or not they have attended a course, have adequate insight into the needs of adoptive children as well as into what adopting a child may entail. Perhaps some applicants have not sufficiently familiarised themselves with what adoption may mean for the child.

Applicants who are prepared to accept an older child should have knowledge and insight about what this may involve.

The report must shed light on how the applicants will deal with the child's need for knowledge about his/her own identity and origin. What thoughts do the applicants have about the challenges they will face as a family as the adoptive child grows up? Special emphasis must be put on the child's puberty and adolescence, when the questions of identity and breaking away will most probably come to the fore and mark family life.

Are the applicants aware that they must tell the child that he/she is adopted as soon as it is advisable to do so? Do they know that when the child is 18 years old he/she is entitled to receive information about the biological parents and background if this information is available? What thoughts do the applicants have about how they will tackle the situation when the child wishes to find his/her biological family?

If the applicants have their own biological children, the report should convey whether the applicants have considered how an adoptive child may experience his/her own situation as different from that of the other children in the family. What are their thoughts about this?

### **3.9 The adoptive child**

#### *General remarks*

It is natural that applicants show some uncertainty about such an important step as adopting a child. Of course, parents want their child to be healthy and to develop normally, but no one can be given such a guarantee. Therefore, it is important to take this up during the conversation with the applicants and to outline their views in the report.

Most children who are adopted are healthy and develop normally. Nevertheless, applicants must be prepared that children freed for adoption may have physical or mental disorders and may require extra care. Furthermore, the child's special needs or problems may first emerge, or be possible to diagnose, after the adoption has been completed and the child has lived with the adoptive parents for some time.

In the case of intercountry adoption, the adoption organisations have special responsibility for passing on to the applicants the available information prepared by the authorities in the country of origin. The relevant organisation must lobby the authorities actively in order to obtain any available information about the child. However, in some cases information about the child's background may be scanty and partly incomplete.

Children adopted from abroad may be under-stimulated and malnourished when they come to their adoptive parents. As mentioned previously, the child may have experienced several placements and lived in institutions for shorter or longer periods of time prior to the adoption. The child may also have experienced physical and mental abuse. It is difficult, if not impossible, at the time of adoption to predict how these circumstances will affect the child when growing up.

With this in mind it is essential that the caseworker discusses thoroughly with the applicants the uncertain factors that may play a role in adoption. In addition, it is important that the applicants have a realistic understanding of adaptation difficulties that may occur at the start and that they plan how these problems can be dealt with. How will the applicants facilitate the best possible adaptation for the child after adoption? What thoughts do the applicants have about the child's bonding process? Have the applicants thought about the child's grief at the loss of relationships with close care persons and how the child will react to the change of language, environment and culture.

The adoptive child will have a unique personality and individual qualities that may differ from those of the adoptive parents, for example, in temperament and musicality. What thoughts do the applicants have about this? How will they meet, safeguard and stimulate the child's individuality and abilities?

#### *Adoption of a child with special needs*

Some of the children who are freed for adoption have known disabilities or a general background that indicates that in all probability they will require extra care. The applicants' attitude to adopting a child with special needs must be clarified and assessed in the social report. How do the applicants view the prospect of adopting a child with special needs?

The background of some adoptive children is such that the adoptive parents will be faced with more comprehensive and complex challenges than it is possible to foresee. Sometimes the child's special needs and problems first appear or are possible to diagnose after a period of time, perhaps after the adoption has been carried out. What thoughts do the applicants have about this and how would they tackle such a situation?

#### *The age and gender of the child*

In the review the applicants' reasons for any wishes they may have in terms of the child's age or gender must be elicited. Most applicants wish to adopt a small child in order to observe the child's development and to influence the child from the earliest possible age. Although this wish is natural and understandable, it is not always realistic. As a rule when adopting a Norwegian child, the child will be a few months old, and must be at least two months old at the time of adoption. Moreover, in countries of origin there are regulations stipulating that the child's biological parents must be given a certain period of time before they can give their consent to giving their child up for adoption. In some cases this will take time because the authorities must first trace parents who have disappeared. This means that the adoption

process may take a long time and that the child may be one year old or more before the applicants can adopt.

Even so, it is not only small children who need adoptive parents. The applicants should therefore be informed that orphans who are somewhat older also need parents, and should be given the opportunity to consider whether they can adopt an older child. The adoption organisation will propose an age range when it confirms that it will mediate the adoption. Therefore, it is important that it is clearly expressed whether the applicants wish a child in the stated age range.

Occasionally older applicants will adopt a child who is no longer an infant so that the age difference between themselves and the child is not too great. For example, this might apply to applicants who already have children or who for various reasons have the capacity to welcome an older child. An older child who comes to a new country and a new culture may have gone through more or less traumatic experiences with several separations. These children will need stability and parents with above-average energy.

Therefore, it is crucial that the applicants have an understanding of what adopting an older child may entail. Moreover, during the assessment a thorough evaluation of their qualifications for providing a good upbringing must be carried out.

#### *Adoption of siblings*

As a general rule, advance approval is only given for the adoption of one child at a time. However, some applicants have a strong wish to adopt siblings. In such cases the caseworker must evaluate in depth whether conditions are favourable for this. The applicants must have considered carefully what adopting several children of different ages at the same time will mean for them personally, financially and practically. The natural age range for the adoption of siblings is 0-4 years or 0-5 years.

### **3.10 Mediation (applicable only to intercountry adoption)**

#### *Adoption organisation*

It must be made clear in the report which accredited adoption organisation will arrange the adoption and what country this organisation has recommended to the applicants. Advance approval cannot be given to adoptions from several countries at the same time.

When first approached, the municipality should advise applicants to contact one of the adoption organisations so that they can receive guidance on choice of country etc. Where possible, the name of the country selected should appear on the application submitted to the Regional Office for Children, Youth and Family affairs. If the name of the country cannot be given in the application, it is the responsibility of the applicants to inform the Regional office when this has been clarified.

#### *Adoption outside an accredited adoption agency*

If the application for adoption is not made through an accredited adoption organisation, the applicants must give a separate explanation of this and give an account of their association with the particular country in addition to giving the name of the child if this is known. Documentation of how the adoption mediation will take place must be documented to the extent possible. The documentation must be submitted together with the application to the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs.

Applicants must describe how the adoption is to be carried out in the country in question, what channels are to be used and how the freeing of the child for adoption will take place. Moreover, information must be provided about the costs that will arise and how contact with the child is to be established.

### **3.11 Adoption in the case of a Norwegian child (also applicable if there is a parallel application for advance approval of adoption of a child from abroad)**

Regarding the various topics that are to be elucidated in the social report in connection with the adoption of a Norwegian child, it is important to elaborate on points 7, 8 and 9.

A description must be given of how the applicants will be ready to receive a child on very short notice without any special opportunities to prepare for this. The applicants who are being assessed with a view to the placement of a Norwegian child must be made aware that the biological parents cannot give their legal consent until the child is two months old, and that the parents can withdraw their consent to the adoption up the time authorisation is granted. How will the applicants deal with a situation where the child might be placed with them before the child's parents have given their final consent to adoption?

In addition, it must be clarified whether the applicants are aware that in some cases a considerable period of time may elapse from the placement of the child with them until the adoption is finalised, for example, because a paternity case lasts a long time. Another point that must be focused on is how the applicants view becoming adoptive parents to a child who has biological family in Norway, with the opportunity this gives the child to contact the biological family after reaching the age of 18.

The applicants should also be informed that very few Norwegian children are adopted annually under the regulations on domestic adoption where the biological parents consent to adoption. Therefore, they must be made aware that there is little chance that a Norwegian child will be placed with them.

If the application covers both the adoption of a Norwegian child and a child from abroad, two complete social reports must be prepared as mentioned previously. For the most part the social report will be based on the same facts. In the case of the adoption of a Norwegian child, the Professional Board for Adoption Cases will require a number of facts that are unnecessary for the authorities in the country of origin in their case-processing. This applies in particular to information about the applicants' motivation and their views on the special challenges presented when adopting a Norwegian child.

It is essential that at the review stage the applicants think through the similarities and differences when adopting a Norwegian child and a child from a foreign country. What is the background for the parallel applications? What are their thoughts about the similarities and differences mentioned above?

### **3.12 The signature of the applicants**

The applicants must sign the Factual Information section of the social report. See form.

## **IV THE MUNICIPALITY'S ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION**

### **1 The municipality's assessment**

#### **1.1 General remarks**

The caseworker must give an assessment of the applicants based on the information that is presented in the Factual Section, and the assessment in the social report. It is important to make the basis for the assessments explicit. If there is a medical assessment of the applicants, it must be made clear whether this is the caseworker's own opinion or the opinion of others. The users of the social report must never be in doubt as to who said what.

The assessment section is intended to elaborate on central questions in the conversation. The caseworker's discussion of and assessment of different information must be presented clearly.

#### **1.2. About the review process**

- How many conversations were conducted with the applicants at home or elsewhere?
- How long has the review lasted?
- Did any special circumstances or problems arise during the process that may have significance for the final processing of the application?

#### **1.3 The applicants' qualifications for adoption**

Under this point a general description and evaluation of the applicants must be provided. It is the applicants' suitability in a future perspective that the evaluation must be based on.

- What personal impression do the applicants make on you?
- What impression does the overall family situation give?
- How would you describe the interaction in the family (between the spouses, and between children and parents)?
- Does the desire to adopt a child seem to be well-considered?
- If the applicants are childless due to infertility, does it appear that problems connected to this have been confronted and dealt with?
- Does the marriage appear to be stable?
- Do the applicants have a stable and good social network?
- Are there any annotations on their police record of good conduct?
- Are there any circumstances related to their health certificate that weigh against granting the application?
- Are there any matters concerning the applicants' joint financial situation that may present an impediment to the adoption?
- Do the applicants appear to be well-prepared as to the implications of adopting a child?
- Are the applicants prepared for the child having special needs?
- Are the applicants prepared to cope with the special challenges that may arise when adopting a child from abroad?
- Are the applicants prepared to deal with the special challenges that may arise when adopting a Norwegian child?
- Do the applicants appear to have special resources in terms of adopting a child?

- Have the applicants expressed an interest in adopting a somewhat older child or siblings, or are they positive towards adopting a child with special needs? If so, the applicants' qualification in this regard must be noted.
- Is there any other relevant information, for example the age of the applicants, that should be noted?
- What conditions appear to be present that will ensure the adoptive child the best possible circumstances when growing up?

#### **1.4 Adaptation of any previously adopted children**

Under this point the caseworker must assess the applicants' care abilities in relation to children adopted previously and the adaptation of the adopted child to the family.

- How did the applicants experience becoming parents?
- How have the family and the neighbourhood welcomed the child?
- How have they made the practical arrangements?
- How has the child developed physically, emotionally, socially and in terms of language?
- Is the child's general development normal and satisfactory for his/her age?
- Does there appear to be normal, strong bonding between the child and his/her parents?
- How does the child function at play and in the company of other children?
- How long is it since the last child arrived in the family? Will there be a natural age difference (at least two years) between this child and a new adoptive child? (This is relevant if the last child is still below the age of two.)
- Is there any other relevant information?

#### **2 Recommendation with reasons**

The social report must conclude with a positive or negative recommendation. It must state explicitly whether the applicants are recommended to be deemed eligible to adopt a child and/or siblings.

The statement must be dated, signed and stamped (all the pages in the report must be stamped).