

Flourish Fostering is an experienced provider of therapeutic fostering services to local authorities in the northwest and south of England. As part of its fostering provision, it supports parent and child placements within a family setting. It intends to extend its provision by offering residential placements in a family assessment centre.

This will be an independent service which will offer robust, fair and evidence-based assessments in respect of parents and their children up to eight years old. The parent and child will be living at the unit full time for twelve weeks and the unit will be permanently staffed.

Site Description

The application property is a detached two storey dwelling situated in an existing residential settlement to the west of Rochdale, on Clay Lane.

The dwelling comprises four bedrooms. To the ground floor there is an entrance hall, W/C, lounge, a second lounge, dining room, office, kitchen-diner, utility room, garage and two ensuite bedrooms. To the first floor there are three bedrooms and a family bathroom. There is a garden to the rear of the property, and a drive for off-street parking; suitable for five cars, in addition to the two cars that can park in the garage.

Figure 1 - Outline of the Site



Proposed Development

The property is currently in use as a Class C3 – Residential Dwelling. The applicant however wishes to change the use of the property to a Family Assessment Unit. The purpose of the Unit would be to assess whether parents have the necessary skills and capabilities to look after their children; with a view to providing them with necessary support and guidance moving forward.

The proposal would involve the use of four bedrooms, two on the ground floor and two on the first floor, each being used to house parents with their children. The parents would be contracted to stay at the property for the full duration of their assessment which will be 12 weeks. Please see below.

Figure 2 - Bedroom Uses

Bedrooms	Use
Bedroom 1 (Ground Floor)	1x Parent, 1-2 Children or 2x Parents, 1-2 Children
Bedroom 2 (Ground Floor)	1x Parent, 1-2 Children or 2x Parents, 1-2 Children
Bedroom 3 (First Floor)	1x Parent, 1x Child or 2x Parents, 1x Child
Bedroom 4 (First Floor)	1x Parent, 1x Child or 2x Parents, 1x Child

Figure 2 outlines the maximum number of parents residing at the site would be 8, with one child each. Bedrooms one and two are large enough to occupy a couple and an additional child if needed.

All families will receive 1-2-1 support from a professional staff member during the day. Therefore, the number of staff depends on the number of residents. At full capacity, there will be up to five staff members including one manager and one social worker during the standard working day. There will be two members of staff on an overnight shift. As such, the Family Assessment Unit will be permanently staffed.

In terms of visitors, this would be restricted to one additional staff member (either a Social Worker or Health Visitor) if a meeting is held, noting this would not be a regular occurrence. Visits from family members and general public will be restricted.

Whilst at the property, parents and children will only leave the premises accompanied by a staff member, until it has been determined their unaccompanied excursions are

possible. Furthermore, whilst at the property, the use of alcohol or non-prescription drugs will be strictly prohibited, and any misuse will result in immediate exclusion.

Families would be referred to the Family Assessment Unit either by a Local Authority or Court. Such families would fall into one of the following categories:

- Parents with children on child protection plans;
- Parents seeking reunification with their children;
- Parents with children which a Local Authority might undertake care proceedings;
- Expectant mothers; and
- Parents learning parenting skills.

Whilst at the property, assessments will be conducted by an experienced and qualified team of social workers, family assessment workers and manager. The assessments will focus on the parenting skills of those referred to the Centre, the emotional and physical development of the children referred to the centre, promotion of parent's self-esteem and confidence, psychological assessments, and child development and care needs.

A report of the findings from the parenting assessment will be provided with a recommendation about whether the assessor thinks the parent(s) are able to care for the child/children in the long-term. The report may provide recommendations of what support, if any, parent(s) may need to be able to care for the children safely.

Flourish would provide a safe place for the child/children, whilst offering support, teaching and assessment to parents, all of which would be underpinned by the Flourish therapeutic approach. With the child's safety the priority, it would endeavour to equip parents in making confident life choices now and in the future, to enable them to make a positive contribution to their community and society. To achieve this, it would offer the support required to parents to allow them to grow and change behaviours where possible.

Transitory plans will also be developed whilst families are at the property, so that they have the skills to function long term within the community.

Market Demand

There is strong market demand and low supply for this service across England and particularly in the north. Manchester has the 12th highest number of care applications per year, out of the 154 local authority areas, which indicates an area of high demand for such a service.

According to The Governments report; Main findings: Children's Social Care in England 2023, in England there are just over 400,000 children in the social care system at any one time, and just over 82,000 of these children are children in care. In this report it was noted that there were only 78 Residential Family Centres with a potential capacity of 444. This number is 0.1% of the children that are involved in social care. According to NSPCC Research, it has proven that early help and intervention can:

“protect children from harm, reduce the need for a referral to child protection services, improve children's long-term outcomes, improve children's home and family life, support children to develop strengths and skills to prepare them for adult life, thus preventing them from becoming long term children in care.”

Residential Family Assessment Centres offer families the direct support to learn how to parent positively and achieve positive outcomes of keeping families safe and together where possible.

Access

Access arrangements to the property will be via Edenfield Road and Bagslate Moor Road, and there is sufficient off-street parking on the driveway/garage. Access into the property will be via the existing front door of No.105 Clay Lane.

Scaling, Siting and Appearance

There are no proposals to alter the external appearance of the building or to change the interior composition of the existing dwelling. The initial plan of the bin store and cycle store has been re-thought and therefore this will now be to the side in the front garden, to maintain the residential appearance. This area has dense trees and is behind the current in-situ wall and therefore will not be visible to the public.

Flourish and what they can offer as a Therapeutic Family Assessment Service

Once the property has received the appropriate consents to operate as a Family Assessment Centre, the Flourish team will work collaboratively with Rochdale, and local Commissioners and teams to ensure they are meeting their needs and that they can prioritise local referrals. They have a genuine desire to work in partnership.

Residential Family Assessment centres are social work led. Three quarters of our roles will be qualified, therapeutically trained social workers. One-to-two roles will be unqualified but will be recruited and developed to high calibre, qualified therapeutic care workers. Flourish does not struggle to attract staff due to their reputation, ethos, pay and conditions. Their extensive training and qualifications programme means they can attract and support new candidates into the residential care workforce.

Flourish is a highly reputable, therapeutic provider of services to Local Authorities across the north and south of England. Their therapeutic fostering service is rated Outstanding by Ofsted [<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50167324>]

Their model, established by their founders Nicola Tunbridge and Dr Mica Douglas, is sought after and valued by their families, young people and local authority partners. They offer the highest level of family based therapeutic foster care to some of the most traumatised young people and consistently deliver stability, growth and outcomes that simply can't be achieved elsewhere. Without a Flourish family, many of their young people would have ended up in a residential setting.

As part of their provision, they offer family based 'parent and child' care and assessments, however their experience shows that some families would benefit from the option of a therapeutic residential setting where higher levels of support, education and monitoring can be provided. Their approach is one of 'early help', the belief is that if a family can stay together then they will work with them, therapeutically, to achieve this if possible.

Despite complex difficulties parents may be experiencing that has led them to need a family assessment. Flourish Family Assessment Centres can offer a safe, nurturing and facilitating environment where the parent can be guided to offer the best bonding experience that they can with their child. They take a therapeutic approach to assessments and include experiences that help parents to better understand and prioritise their child's needs. It provides psychoeducation as well as practical support

and nurturing experiences to build the best bonds that are possible in the family unit under scrutiny.

The basis of knowledge and understanding of attachment is held with the therapists, social workers and other staff and steeped in the philosophy of Flourish. Attachment and bonding are the foundation that helps children and parents to love and be loved for the rest of their life. They give every parent and child the best possible chance of staying together and staying out of care. Sometimes this is not always possible, but Flourish will do everything they can to provide the right conditions for healing and attachment to thrive.

The Rochdale location will provide care and assessment for three-to-four families at any one time. This is a niche provision for those who will most benefit from a therapeutic parenting setting. Our intention is to work with Rochdale in the development of our programme, ensuring it meets local need both now and in the future as needs change, and priority will be given to local families who are suitable for the Flourish programme.

As with all their services, the assessment centre will be highly invested in - attracting, training and retaining those who want to develop and achieve career progression within a therapeutically underpinned service. A high calibre senior staff team has been identified – Registered Manager, Clinical Lead, Responsible Individual – all of whom are experienced in achieving Outstanding ratings as well as outstanding outcomes for the young people and families in their care.

Impact on Local Services

Flourish will offer in-house therapeutic support, this will in fact reduce the strain on community services. Current wait times for therapeutic support within the community can be upwards of twenty weeks and given timescales relating to court and the child's permanency this does not allow parents to receive the much-needed support to aid in their ability to demonstrate they can make and sustain positive change, and in doing so can evidence they are fit to parent their children. As they can offer this in-house, they can start the support as soon as a family is in placement.

Impact On Residential Amenity

The property will continue in residential use, albeit it will provide temporary housing for parents and their children, whilst they are being assessed by trained professionals.

This particular use would additionally help to ensure the skills of the children's parents are developed to a sufficient standard where a safe and harmonious family unit can be facilitated, to the benefit of the wider community. The proposed change of use would therefore compliment the social function of sustainable development.

There would also be a small amount of employment associated with this use, which would help contribute towards meeting the economic function of sustainable development, as set out in the NPPF. The level of employment would be commensurate to the properties location, with the overall operation of the property not readily discernible from neighbouring dwellings. There would be no adverse environmental impact arising out of the proposal.

Impact on Neighbours

The proposed use will involve a use which is likely to be more intensive than ordinary residential occupation with up to a maximum of eight parents, six children and staff members. Nevertheless, what is proposed is a primarily residential use and the level of noise and activity which may result, is not considered to have an impact of concern.

Staff will work between the hours of 8am-8pm and 8pm-8am. Visitors will attend the property between 9am-5pm, therefore this will not have any impact on residents as the hours are that of a typical residential family home.

The other issue to be considered in this context is the possibility of antisocial behaviour from the residents. In this respect it should be noted that the occupants will be on assessment, so there will be a strong incentive for residents to behave appropriately. The applicants have indicated that alcohol or non-prescription drugs will not be allowed on the premises and anybody using them will immediately be excluded. Thus, problems from the use of alcohol and drugs would seem highly unlikely to occur. Additionally, rubbish generated would be no more significant than for the previous use – a 5-bedroom residential dwelling. External and Internal CCTV will be installed.

In any event, as many appeal decisions have outlined, there needs to be a causal link between any proposed use and the fear of crime. At this stage however, no substantive evidence appears to demonstrate such a link exists.

Highways (Parking)

The property has suitable driveway/garage space for seven cars. It is envisaged that residents would be unlikely to bring cars. There will be a maximum of up to four cars at the property for staff members who choose to drive to work. It is considered that there will be limited impact on the existing road use to the previous residential use for 5 bedrooms. Additionally, the site is located in a sustainable location with regular bus services along Edenfield Road, a short walk from the site.

Therefore, as the development will be in an accessible location, and will promote and encourage the use of public transport, walking and cycling, the application is not expected to generate a significant impact over that of an ordinary dwelling.

Hygiene

Flourish recognises that given the higher occupancy than the typical family home, there will be an increase in waste produced from the centre. Flourish will therefore pay for private waste removal which means they can request extra collection for the bins when required. This will also alleviate any strain on the council, as well as prevent any potential pests that can be attracted to uncollected waste.

Conclusion

There will be a maximum of eight parents, with their children housed within the property. They will have a bedroom each on the ground and first floor of the property. The property will be permanently operated by two professional staff members – including one on an overnight shift and one on a waking shift. Visitors will be limited to an additional staff member if a meeting is held (Health Visitor or Social Worker). Whilst at the property, parents and children will only leave the premises accompanied by a trained Social Worker until it has been determined unaccompanied excursions are possible.

The proposed use is unlikely to have any impact on traffic generation or parking arrangements to the previous residential use as parking. The site is in a sustainable location with access to public transport which allows the option of accessing the site via a sustainable mode of transport. In addition, the level of noise and activity from what is considered as the primarily residential use is not considered to have an impact.

The proposed development creates a healthy, inclusive, and safe place to live by providing temporary housing for parents and their children whilst they are being assessed by trained professionals. This particular use provides a space for a safe and harmonious family unit. Ultimately, this proposal is set to have wider benefits to the community and contribute positively to healthy communities.

Our proposed Therapeutic Family Assessment Centre will provide a realistic assessment of parenting capacity and the impact on children's daily lives. As a therapeutic service, they offer empathetic support, guidance, and intervention plans to help families make necessary changes and improvements, aligning with the goals of family preservation or reunification. Our in-house therapist will provide one-on-one sessions to address barriers to positive parenting.