

Criteria for Personal (aka Warner) Interviewing

Personal interviews, also known as Warner interviews, have typically been used, alongside the formal interview, in residential social care settings. The mandate for this type of interview came from 'Choosing with Care: The report of the Committee of Inquiry into Selection, Development and Management of Staff in Children's Homes' (Warner, 1992). According to Lord Warner, preliminary interviews can be seen as a 'less structured and more informal process than the final interview'. (Choosing with Care Chapter 4 Selecting Staff para 4.37)

Warner recommended that employers should undertake a 'preliminary interview' to ask questions that would probe candidates about their personal life, attitudes and motivations in order to establish a fuller picture of the character of the applicant and their suitability to work with the client group. Warner considered that any concerns about the infringement of equal opportunities on the grounds that different questions are asked of different candidates, are misplaced. He goes so far as to say that an employer could be considered to be negligent in not making use of a preliminary interview to explore sensitive personal issues to assess the suitability of a candidate to work with children. He goes on to propound that large interview panels are unsuited to undertaking such a task. Proper staff training for those undertaking preliminary interviews is essential.

'The aim should be to achieve a full and rounded picture of the candidate, providing more detailed and complete information than is possible with the traditional application form - interview system.' (Choosing With Care as above para 4.5)

Warner recognised that the 'exploration of personal issues or spontaneous follow-up questions are seen as difficult by some employers, particularly local authorities' (Choosing with Care Chap 4 Selecting Staff para. 4.3)

Nevertheless it is important that questions are focussed around attitudes to control and punishment of children and the stability of the candidates' emotional and sexual relationships. The questions asked at a pre-interview session should be on a one-to-one basis with the interviewer and the candidate. Ideally, the process will also enable candidates to have a full understanding of the requirements of the post and its complexities.

The purpose of the preliminary interview is twofold: to explore questions which may have been raised by any of the early selection and recruitment processes such as the application form and/or references and to consider questions which are more difficult to address in the formal interview setting. For example, issues around sexual relationships should be included as part of this process so that the extent to which a candidate's character is strong enough to resist sexual temptation from children in their care is tested. It can also provide information about whether their sexual interests might cause them to pursue sexual relationships with children for their own gratification.

As part of preliminary interview process, the emotional stability of the candidate as well as the stability of their sexual relationships will need to be explored. Motivation to work with children as well as attitudes to power and authority should also be looked into.

'...assessment of candidates should be capable of considering the ability to contribute to the social, emotional, physical and spiritual needs of children and ... the methods used should focus on the values of staff, their commitment to working within and contributing to a team, their ability to work with others, including parents, and their self-confidence as people.' (Choosing with Care, 1992, Chapter 4, Selecting Staff para. 4.2)

Organisations that employ staff to work with children are best placed to determine who within their organisations should conduct such interviews. In order for the interviews to remain informal, they should be carried out by no more than two people. Written records of the interview should be made and shared with those making the final decision to appoint.

The following specific criteria should be applied when considering whether or not a particular post should carry a requirement for a personal or Warner interview:

The post requires the post-holder to work with highly vulnerable children, for example:

- Looked After Children;
- Children who are at potential risk of significant harm;
- Disabled children (who may have intimate care needs)
- Children who are excluded from school
- Children who live away from home
- Sick children

Posts where staff work with children in vulnerable situations and where they have sole care or responsibility for a child or group of children. For example:

- Staff who supervise children on activities away from home such as residential trips;
- Peripatetic professionals who work on a one to one basis with children without being supervised during such work

Any candidate who has had information disclosed about them as part of the CRB process

Post-holders, who as part of their job description, will work with abusive images of children on the internet, e.g. Police officers who work in special units, auditors of IT systems, Police forensic computer examiners.