

Allowance Payments

When do I seek approval for financial support?

When an Accredited Adoption Service Provider (AASP) completes the report seeking approval from the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) delegate to commence open adoption action, include:

- whether approval is being sought for the OOHC Adoption Allowance (means-tested) at the DCJ standard, +1, or +2 rate **OR** the OOHC Adoption Transition Support and Annual Payment
- a statement that if an adoptive parent does not meet the means-test for the allowance for a particular year, the Annual Payment will be provided for that year
- any contingencies that are being sought and supporting evidence
- any out-of-guidelines payments that are being sought and supporting evidence.

How do I assess eligibility for +1 and +2 allowance rates?

A Special Needs Assessment (SNA) is required to determine the appropriate rate of allowance. The SNA must have been completed before seeking approval to commence open adoption action, and must be current within 12 months.

Why do I need to use a Special Needs Assessment?

There are differences between the Special Needs Assessment (SNA) and the Child Assessment Tool (CAT). The needs of children and corresponding allowance rates are likely to score differently depending on which assessment tool is used.

The use of the SNA will ensure consistency in allowance rates pre and post adoption orders. This is because adoptive parents are required to provide evidence of the child's ongoing need for +1 or +2 allowance rates. If an SNA was not previously used to assess the child's needs then the adoptive family may experience a reduction in the rate of allowance.

Furthermore, use of the SNA by DCJ and AASPs will ensure consistency in how the support needs of children are assessed across the sector.

How do I show eligibility for the means-tested allowance?

Eligibility criteria for the allowance includes eligibility for Family Tax Benefit Part A (FTBA) in any amount in the previous financial year. This can be evidenced via a summary statement from Centrelink called 'About your Family Tax Benefit'. It will show that an FTBA lump sum was payable after an assessment of income, or that FTBA was payable after a balancing of payments.

Out-of-Guidelines Payments

Open adoption generally requires that adoptive parents have the capacity to meet financial and all other needs of the child without support from the department.

However, out-of-guidelines payments of allowances and contingencies may be considered on a case-by-case basis. The circumstances must be exceptional and the financial impact cannot be reasonably met by the proposed adoptive parent or birth parent.

Determining whether circumstances are exceptional

The following conditions need to be present, and evidenced, before submitting a funding request based on exceptional circumstances:

- The circumstances are clearly not typical when compared with the overwhelming majority of open adoption matters.
- Both the financial impact of meeting the exceptional needs **and** the financial circumstances of the proposed adoptive family have been considered.
- Through training, assessment and casework support, and based on the evidence available at the time, the proposed adoptive parent has considered the child's additional needs - before applying for open adoption and when discussing how they will carry out the post-adoption plan.
- All other agencies who may be able to provide financial assistance must have been considered (e.g. NDIS, Centrelink) and this is specified in the funding request.
- Co-payment between the department and adoptive family is considered, and specified in the funding request.
- If the request relates to family time (contact) and it is not practical or reasonable for the birth parents to meet the costs of travel and accommodation, the capacity of the proposed adoptive parents to solely meet the costs is considered and specified.
- The OOHC open adoption assessment should state a clear position about the suitability of open adoption in the absence of an out-of-guidelines payment.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, open adoption is the least preferred permanency option and a rare occurrence. If meeting the child's needs (e.g. cultural needs) requires a financial commitment that is atypical for other adoptive families, a rationale exists for out-of-guidelines support.

Note: An out-of-guidelines contingency payment should be proposed to cover a specific area of need. An adoption allowance, when otherwise not eligible, should not be proposed to cover the costs associated with a specific area of need.