

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

A Practice Toolkit for
Fostering Services



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Introduction from our Chief Executive Officer

Recruiting more foster carers is more urgent than ever – the number of people choosing to foster in England is declining for the third year running, with 6% fewer fostering households in 2024 compared to 2021. In 2024, 4,055 fostering households were approved while 4,820 stopped fostering - an overall loss of 765 fostering households. The numbers tell us more are leaving than joining each year. This means there simply aren't enough foster carers to meet the needs of the growing numbers of children coming into care.

We know that the retention of current foster carers is therefore as important as recruitment. We were delighted to be supported to do research into this crucial issue by the KPMG Foundation in May 2023 and now to produce this best practice toolkit based on the findings to provide fostering services with advice and tips on how to improve their practice.

I am pleased that recruitment and retention is high on the Government's agenda with the creation, and now extension, of the regional recruitment hubs across the whole of England, but the issue has been ignored for too long.

This toolkit is unashamedly child focused, as everything we do should be. It sets out good recruitment practice, which is rooted in meeting the needs of children who are the ultimate beneficiary of the foster care system. Keeping children at the heart of what we do shapes our practice when we think about what they need from a foster carer and what they need from a fostering service. This toolkit advocates a more personal and child centred approach, from when a foster carer first picks up the phone to enquire about fostering to approval and beyond.

Good foster carers can make a huge difference in the life of a child, by providing them with a safe, stable and loving home so that they can thrive. It is therefore vital that fostering services across England are recruiting and retaining the best foster carers, to achieve the best outcomes for children. We hope this toolkit will allow them to improve and refine their practice.

Sarah Thomas

Chief Executive Officer, The Fostering Network

Introduction to the toolkit

In England, on 31st March 2024:

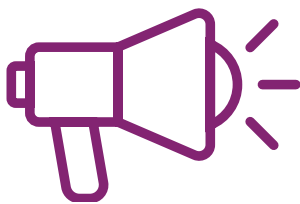
- 56,390 children were living with foster families.
- This is 67% of the children in care looked after away from home.
- There were 42,615 fostering households - 44% of these were mainstream local authority households and 35% of these were mainstream Independent Fostering Agency households. 21% were in local authority family and friends foster care households.

The number of children in care in England increased every year until 2023. The number of children in care in England at March 2024 remains high at 83,630 (an increase of 4% since 2020). Almost 70% of these children were in foster care.

At the same time there has been a downward trend in the number of applications and newly approved households for mainstream fostering. In the local authority sector, the number of foster carers has decreased by 15% since 2020. In the IFA sector the number of foster carers has decreased by 4%.

Ensuring there are sufficient numbers of skilled and knowledgeable foster carers is one of the biggest challenges currently facing the fostering sector.

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About the toolkit

In May 2023, The Fostering Network published timely research into the retention and recruitment of foster carers in England,¹. The research aimed to explore how to achieve a diverse and stable foster care workforce in England. This research was supported by the [KPMG Foundation](#) and was conducted by the [Centre for Evidence and Implementation \(CEI\)](#).

The study focused on foster care outside the context of family and friends foster care (kinship care). Building on existing evidence, it engaged with foster carers and fostering services to explore both the barriers and what works well in recruiting and retaining foster carers. It provides a robust evidence base to support the achievement of a diverse and stable foster care workforce in England:

- Secondary data analysis (Ofsted Fostering in England data and The Fostering Network's State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 survey data).
- Survey of prospective, current, and former foster carers – 1,879 responses².
- Interviews and focus groups with fostering service staff, prospective foster carers, current foster carers, and former foster carers – 52 people.

This toolkit aims to bring the research findings to life and has been developed as a useful resource to support fostering services and practitioners to achieve good practice, in both the recruitment and retention of foster carers. It identifies what foster carers need, when they need it and how we can meet those needs.

This child-centred toolkit is based on the research findings which clearly indicated that the best recruitment strategy is good retention of foster carers. As one participant said: 'It does not matter how many new foster carers are recruited if they cannot provide quality care to meet the needs of children in care, or if those who can provide the quality care are not retained; 'retention is how you recruit.'

It promotes good practice, which is rooted in meeting the needs of children who are the ultimate beneficiary of the foster care system. Keeping children at the heart of what we do shapes our practice when we think about what they need from a foster carer and what they need from a fostering service.

Building well-resourced, resilient, experienced, and highly responsive fostering services is critical to achieving good outcomes for children so they can thrive into adulthood and beyond.

¹ Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., & Gupta, S. 2023. Foster carer recruitment and retention in England. Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network.

² 1,751 of the respondents were approved foster carers (93%); 112 (6%) had stopped fostering within the last five years; and 16 (1%) were enquiring or applying to foster

Valuing and respecting foster carers

The research highlighted that ‘the importance of feeling respected and supported was core to foster carer retention and recruitment’.

Foster carers need to be fully supported and valued from the moment they first approach a fostering service, during their assessment and approval and throughout the time that children are in their care. To help achieve this, the following key principles should underpin best practice in an integrated recruitment and retention process.

Embed a relationship-based approach

A relationship-based approach prioritises building trust, understanding and support between agencies and potential foster families, and between social workers and foster carers already in their role. It acknowledges the unique needs and experiences of both the children in care and the families providing it, leading to a stronger and more sustainable foundation. This approach starts with the person who takes the initial enquiry and continues through to the people that foster carers are linked with in the service, including senior management. It helps ensure that foster carers feel valued and supported throughout their fostering journey, leading to better outcomes for both children and foster carers.

Recognise the complexity of the foster carer role

Foster carers open their homes and devote their lives to caring for children who have experienced family breakdowns and trauma. As a result of adversities in their life, the children often have multiple and complex needs and are at a particular risk from poor social, health and educational outcomes. Children may communicate their trauma experiences through their behaviour, and often need support from their foster carers to regulate their emotions. These potential challenges should be reflected to prospective foster carers from the outset of their application, and they should be trained and supported by practitioners who fully understand the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

Provide quality support and information

Access to stable and supportive staff, as well as accurate and timely information, are critical components in both the fostering application process and when providing foster care. Prospective foster carers too frequently withdraw their application due to a lack of support and information. There is also a strong correlation between foster carers intention to continue fostering with how supported they feel in the role. This includes contact with social workers, access to training, and sufficient financial support. Training and supporting a skilled and experienced foster carer workforce leads to better quality care, minimises the number

of unplanned moves for children, and helps children to grow, develop and achieve positive outcomes.

children in care in England, an increase of 29% on the previous year. This reduced by less than 0.5% in 2024.

Work with cultural competence

- In England, 23% of children in care are from a black, mixed race or Asian minority ethnic background³.
- In England, 17% of fostering households are from a black, mixed race or Asian minority ethnic background.
- On 31 March 2023 there were 7,290 unaccompanied asylum-seeking

Working with cultural competence is crucial to ensuring that children placed in foster care have positive and supportive experiences, ultimately benefiting the well-being of the children. All practitioners involved with assessing, approving and supporting foster carers should feel confident in initiating or engaging in discussions about matters related to culture, language, ethnicity and religion.

Equality, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EEDI)

"Through building the foundations of equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion in the fostering community, we can better support all children and young people in foster care to have the opportunities they deserve. Together, we can make fostering the very best it can be."

- The Fostering Network

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training should be provided for all practitioners and foster carers which includes understanding about various cultures, religions and traditions, and the needs of ethnically diverse children. EDI principles should be embedded in assessment processes and across all elements of practice.

The Fostering Network - [Equality, equity, diversity and inclusion: promoting inclusive practice in fostering | The Fostering Network](#)

[The Black Care Experience Charter](#) - How to promote cultural competence

[The Black Care Experience](#) - Recommends mandatory training for services and foster carers to provide insight and knowledge on how to care for and promote the culture and identity of the black child or young person in their care.

[New Family Social](#) - Offers a wealth of services and insight. They work with fostering services to develop their services to be as LGBTQ+ inclusive as possible.

Recruitment

Research findings

There is a significant gap between the number of applications and those that go on to become approved foster carers. 71% of completed foster carer applications are withdrawn by the applicant.

Reasons for not progressing enquiries and withdrawing applications were explored in the research. These varied from deciding to apply to another service, feeling that it was not the right time, realising that they could not afford to foster, or their relationship with the assessor.

- Prospective foster carers often withdraw their applications upon realising the complexity and intensity of fostering, which can arise late in the assessment process. This includes the multiple and complex needs many children have, and the schedule of required meetings which may impact on a potential foster carer's ability to maintain their existing employment.
- Applicants are not being given sufficient information to support their decision early enough in the approval process. This often leads to individuals and fostering services investing time and resources when fostering might not be the right fit.

- Some foster carers reported initial messaging in advertising campaigns as being misleading about the realities of fostering.
- Foster carers viewed being given honest information early about the challenges involved as key to improving the application process. There was also a general sentiment that if you expected the challenges, you were more likely to continue.

Applicants highlighted professionals investing appropriate time in them from the outset of the fostering process as being very important.

It made them feel genuinely valued and instilled in them the confidence that the service would truly understand them and stand by them when needed. Feeling confident is a key foundation for building the essential trust needed to ensure long-lasting, quality relationships between foster carers and fostering services.

Negative experiences of the application process being too long and intensive, and underpinned by inconsistent levels of service contact, were common in the research.

Factors contributing to a positive experience:

- Reliable, responsive and consistent communication with their fostering service.

- Able to have questions answered honestly and accurately from a skilled assessing social worker, when they arose. Being given accurate expectations of the timelines and process, where participants had a clear idea of what the assessment process entailed.
- Visits arranged around prospective foster carers' working hours and personal circumstances..
- Opportunities for prospective carers to engage with experienced foster carers, including seeing other carers like them during the process – whether by age, ethnicity, or culture.

Potential foster carers also identified the need for social workers and services to be more culturally sensitive and aware of different religious practices.

- They highlighted how important it is for services to be aware and appreciative of different cultural norms, holidays and festivals; and to use appropriate and respectful language.

Tapping into people's motivations to foster while providing realistic expectations of the challenges and support available may help recruit quality, motivated carers.

Consistent with other findings, the top three motivations to foster were:

- I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care (89%).
- I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family (67%).
- I enjoy working with children (58%).

Foster carers felt that it was important to receive adequate financial

compensation, but that focussing recruitment advertising campaigns on financial compensation may encourage applications from people for the wrong reasons. Such campaigns can also make children in care feel unwanted and give the impression that their carers are motivated to foster purely for the money.

More work is needed to diversify the variety of fostering families available by recruiting more foster carers from different backgrounds and with a wide range of skills and experience.

- While the total numbers of Asian/ Asian British foster carers have increased, and the numbers of Black/ Black British foster carers have remained around the same, there is a need to recruit more foster carers from both groups.
- There is a need for more foster carers to support children with special educational needs and disabilities, teenagers, and large sibling groups.



Best practice for recruitment

1. Marketing

Create a successful marketing strategy which includes an action plan and key performance indicators for the recruitment of foster carers, which also has a comprehensive and empathetic approach that resonates with potential foster carers. Remember you are marketing fostering to adults, they need to see themselves in the role and campaigns should reflect this and catch their attention.

Co-production with young people and foster carers

- Involve young people and foster carers in the creation of marketing materials by holding focus groups or workshops to gain views and ensure the authenticity of messaging.

Targeted, diverse communication

- Tailor marketing to address local recruitment needs based on the service's recruitment strategy.
- Understanding the unique demographics and needs of the local area is the first step. This involves analysing local statistics on children in care, understanding the specific needs of children, and identifying gaps in the current foster care provision. This will help to highlight the need for diversity within foster care and the specific needs of local children.

- Highlight the positive impact foster care can have on the children who need foster carers and the children already in the family.

- Foster care can profoundly change lives. It provides children in need with stability, love, and the opportunity to thrive.
- Dedicated webpages: Share case studies featuring real-life stories of foster families and the children they've supported. These stories could include testimonials from foster carers, their birth children, and foster children.
- Social media campaigns: Use social media platforms to run campaigns that highlight foster carers stories with videos and quotes.
- Interactive features: Create a "Day in the Life of a Foster Family" video series to illustrate the realities and joys of fostering.
- Community spotlights: Feature interviews with foster carers at events or through webinars for a more personal touch.

Realistic visual representation of children

- Use images that accurately depict children in foster care and the diversity of cultural backgrounds to set realistic expectations for potential foster carers.

Avoid financial incentives in marketing campaigns

- Focus on the rewards of fostering, such as making a positive impact on a child's life.
- Highlight the personal fulfilment that comes with fostering rather than focusing on monetary gains.

Communicate the complexity of the foster carer role

- Facilitate open events that encourage interaction between prospective foster carers and current foster carers.
- Provide a platform for current foster carers to share their experiences and the support they receive, as well as providing a realistic portrayal of the challenges and rewards of fostering.
- Use testimonials and real-life anonymised success stories from experienced foster carers that demonstrate the positive impact of foster care on children and young people's wellbeing and outcomes.

Constant evaluation

- Regularly assess the recruitment process through feedback from recently approved foster carers.
- Use this feedback to make continuous improvements in recruitment materials.



2. Initial contact

Building trust

- Trust can be built by limiting the number of social workers that prospective foster carers work with, from initial contact all the way through to matching. This allows prospective foster carers to build trusting relationships with a key social worker ensuring consistency, stability and limiting bureaucracy.
- It also allows honest conversations about the role to be facilitated early in the process to inform decision making and ensure newly approved foster carers are well-equipped for the role.
- Learning from case reviews tells us that the more people involved in the journey, the more likely it is that information will be lost. This also creates a safeguarding risk for the children who we hold at the centre of recruitment.



**Immediate
acknowledgement**

**Follow-up within
24 hours**

Responsivity

- Responsiveness is crucial because it reflects the level of care and attention applicants can expect throughout the fostering process.
- **Immediate acknowledgment:** Automatically acknowledge receipt of inquiries within minutes using an auto-response system. Include a warm and welcoming message, confirming that their inquiry has been received and will be attended to shortly. Within the auto-response you could provide comprehensive information about the fostering process, requirements, and what applicants can expect in the follow up response. Include a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section and contact details for further queries.
- **Follow-up within 24 hours (if possible):** Ensure a personal follow-up within 24 hours. This can be through a phone call or a personalised email, providing more information about the next steps.
- Consider how competitors respond and the timescales they abide by and then ensure your service is being just as prompt with communication.

Open-mindedness

- The only two legitimate reasons to reject an applicant are the lack of a spare bedroom and the applicant being under 18 years old.
- It is important to remain open-minded with applicants since all families are diverse. Remain solution-focused to overcome initial barriers.

Listen and build on motivations

- Discuss and understand the applicant's motivations for fostering while providing realistic expectations of challenges and available support.
- Highlight the fulfilling nature of fostering and provide a balanced and realistic picture by using real examples and stories.

Reassurance

- Acknowledge that fostering is a life-changing experience and a significant life decision to make.
- Concerns raised by the applicant must be listened to and addressed with reassurance grounded in good fostering knowledge.

Confidence in your knowledge base

- It is important that the person taking enquiries at the fostering service has a comprehensive understanding of the service's processes, policies, and procedures as it will prevent unnecessary delays in responding to applicants' queries.
- Being able to offer immediate and informed responses also instils confidence in the applicants regarding the service's competence.

First impressions

- Ensure you have the tone of the conversation right by using a warm and understanding tone balanced with energy and enthusiasm.

- Avoid using jargon that might confuse nervous applicants who may be unfamiliar with language used by the service.

Unique selling points

- Clearly explain the unique reasons to foster with your fostering service. What do you do well? What do you offer fostering families that other services may not? Do you have close working relationships between the fostering team and the child's social worker team?

Maintaining records and follow-ups

- Keep records of initial contacts and withdrawn applications for 3 years, for the purpose of actively following up with invites to events and/or newsletters to maintain engagement and an interest in fostering.
- See [Initial Contact template](#).



3. Home visits

Fostering services should be working towards a more efficient, transparent, and supportive home visit process for potential foster carers which enables the assessor to observe interactions, assess the living environment and address any immediate concerns or questions from all household members.

Flexible scheduling for applicants

- Recognise that applicants may have commitments outside of typical working hours and ensure that the home visit is scheduled to fit in with their availability.
- Allowing for visits outside of normal working hours ensures the best chance of having all the household members present. This is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the household dynamics.

Completing the application form during the visit

- Remove the burden of completing an application form beforehand. This reduces duplication and speeds up the assessment process. It allows the assessor to guide applicants through the form, as they answer the assessor's questions and ensure accuracy.
- See [Home Visit template](#).

Knowledge base on children who are looked after and their needs

- Those conducting home visits should have in-depth knowledge of the specific needs of children looked after, including the impact of trauma and reparenting requirements. They should know everything about how fostering works in their service and be able to talk confidently with in-depth experience to answer questions and provide reassurance.
- Ensure all staff have the necessary qualifications, lived experience, up-to-date safeguarding training and a thorough understanding of case review messages related to foster carers.

Transparency about the process

- Transparency builds trust so it is important to clearly explain the fostering process, expected duration and available support services for the applicants.

Early discussion of finances

- Initiate discussions regarding financial aspects early to help applicants plan and make informed decisions about fostering as it relates to their employment, mortgages and other financial commitments.

4. Preparation for foster training

Fostering services need to ensure that foster carer applicants receive training which supports them to be well-prepared, confident and equipped to meet the diverse needs of the children in their care. The research showed that foster carers wanted a robust induction training and felt that this would support better retention too.

Best practice recommendations:

Importance of training at early stages

- Offering preparation training at an early stage ensures that potential foster carers are equipped with essential information from the outset.
- This empowers applicants to make informed decisions around whether fostering is right for them and their family.

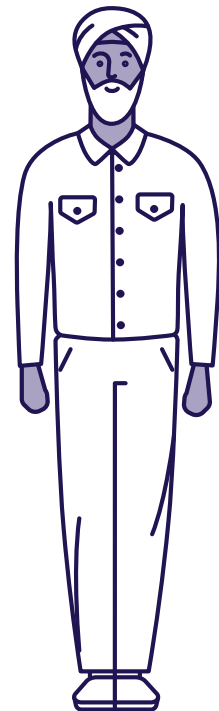
Involvement of foster carers to share lived experience

- Inviting experienced foster carers to share their invaluable knowledge and insights in training programs can enhance the learning experience for new applicants.

- Introducing experienced foster carers at this early stage will create a sense of community among applicants by connecting them with a peer support network from the outset.

The Fostering Network Skills to Foster

- The Fostering Network: [Skills to Foster](#). Recently extensively updated, this preparation training provides a structured and comprehensive programme for foster carer applicants.



5. Assessment

The assessment of foster carers should be a supportive and effective process whilst maintaining a focus on safeguarding. The assessment stage should build on the relationship of trust which has been established during the initial contact and home visit. Foster carer applicants highlighted the importance of knowledge sharing, feeling valued and the need for peer support during the assessment.

Best practice recommendations:

Team structure

- Develop a team structure that ensures consistent relationships between applicants and assessors throughout the assessment process to build trust.
- Be mindful of other capacity issues, to ensure that the team can effectively manage the workload without compromising the quality of assessments.
- In local authorities, this could be pressures from kinship assessment timescales.

Peer mentors

- Assign applicants a peer mentor to provide practical insights and emotional support during the assessment process.

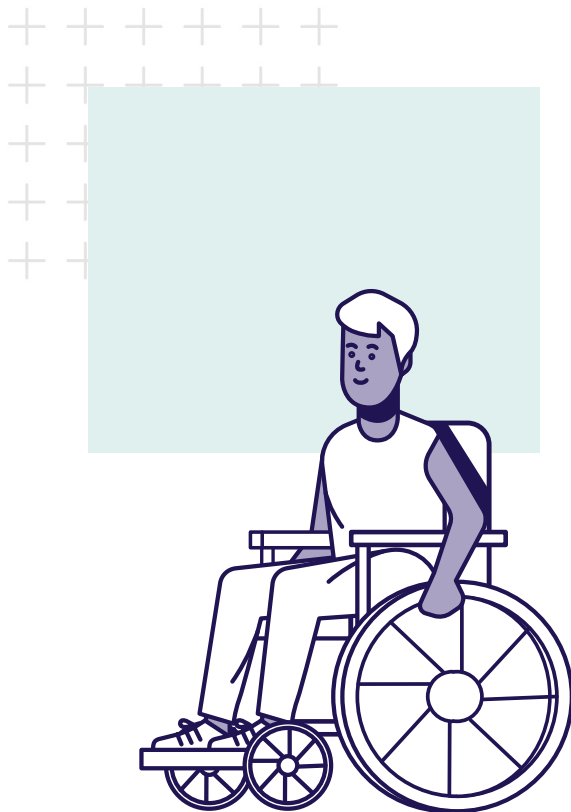
- Peer mentors can share their own experiences which offer a valuable perspective that complements the formal assessment.
- The Fostering Network [Fostering Wellbeing](#) is an innovative programme that aims to improve the wellbeing outcomes for care experienced children and young people by influencing the way we work together to provide that care.

Identifying and addressing gaps

- The assessment should highlight strengths but identify areas where applicants may require additional support.
- Develop personalised learning and development plans to address identified gaps, ensuring that these are achievable, so foster carers receive the support they require.
- Ensure open communication and empathy so applicants feel heard, valued, respected and safe to share their experiences and their worries.
- Share the assessment template with prospective foster carers so they can see what information will be required throughout the assessment process. Create an assessment timeline for everyone to remain on track with deadlines.
- Provide positive feedback and reinforcement to boost confidence and reassure applicants about their ability to become successful foster carers.

Child-focused assessments:

- Ensure that the assessment includes the perspectives and needs of the children looked after. How applicants will meet the needs of children should be the critical focus.
- Involve all household members in the assessment process to gain a comprehensive understanding of the family dynamic.
- Ensure a robust support network is assessed and approved alongside the primary applicants to ensure resilience and natural support breaks.



6. Approval

The approval process for foster carers should be efficient, transparent and consistent.

Quality assurance

- Regular quality assurance of assessments from senior members of staff enables confident decision-making by ensuring that each aspect of the assessment meets the required quality standards, reducing the risk of errors or oversights which could lead to safeguarding concerns.
- Quality assurance throughout the process ensures that fostering assessments are 'panel ready' in a timely manner, minimising delays in the approval process.
- See [Quality Assurance template](#).

The role of the foster panel

- The panel's main responsibility is to assess individuals or families who wish to become foster carers to come to an evidenced-based recommendation as to whether approval is appropriate.
- Remember the assessment is not a test and the foster panel is not a pass or fail judgment but a regulatory requirement in the quality assurance process.
- The foster panel's role is to ensure the thoroughness and fairness of the assessment, providing additional insights and recommendations.

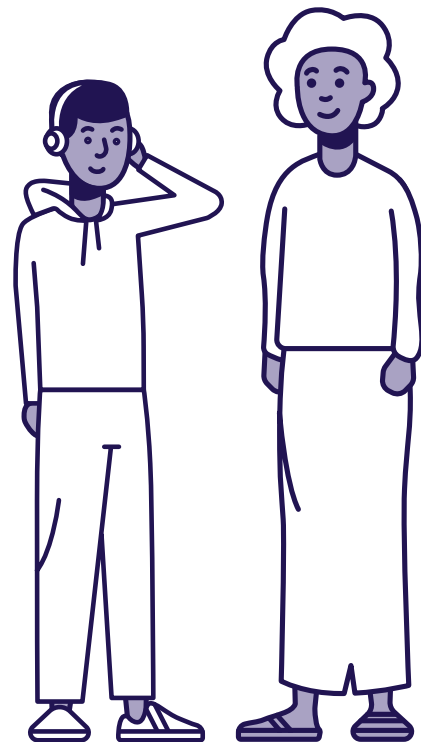
- The foster panel's feedback contributes to the wider quality of care review, ensuring that processes are effective, and standards are maintained throughout the recruitment process.
- Implementing the transfer protocol helps maintain consistent standards and practices, ensuring that the high-quality care provided by foster carers is upheld regardless of changes in service.

Approval status considerations

- To offer the best possible option for children and allow for good matching, the terms of approval need to be child focused and wide (e.g. 0-18yrs, 5-18yrs). This approach enables the best possible matches to be made, provides opportunity for growth in skills and abilities, and streamlines the service to make the best use of the resources available at any one time.
- Terms of approval should reflect a full and thorough assessment which concludes on three main factors:
 1. The ability to provide permanency, OR short-term / task centred care
 2. The skills and ability to care for a particular age range of children
 3. The capacity to care for a particular number of children up to a max of three (or sibling group).

The Fostering Network Transfer Protocol

- The Fostering Network: [Transfer Protocol](#) gives recommendations to ensure smooth transitions when carers move between fostering services.



Retention

Research findings

More mainstream foster carers (excluding family and friends foster carers) stopped fostering in 2024 than were approved.

The research particularly focused on resignation initiated by foster carers so that services can learn and put processes in place to improve retention and workforce stability.

- It found that foster carers often switch to another service with the hope of receiving better support, respect, and pay or conditions.

Foster carers who rate the support they receive from their fostering service as excellent or good are more likely to recommend and continue fostering.

- Positive experiences of support included: a reliable and available fostering social worker, being given support without asking for it, support during transitions for children, when co-ordinating special educational needs or mental health support, and when crises arose. The Mockingbird programme was also highlighted as a positive support.
- Practical support was particularly important for Black, African and Caribbean foster carers.

Receiving sufficient, consistent support is a challenge faced by foster carers and a key determinant of foster carer retention.

- Challenges included feeling that social workers often dismissed or judged foster carers knowledge and concerns, high staff turnover, a lack of understanding about the foster carer role, a lack of communication between social workers and social care teams, and a lack of approved support networks to access sleepovers and short breaks.
- Foster carers expressed a need for greater emotional support from fostering services. This includes when allegations have been made, and they often feel abandoned.

Better information sharing with foster carers and involving them in key decision-making was regarded as essential for creating a supportive and collaborative environment.

- Positive experiences included social workers and fostering services inviting foster carers to professional meetings and treating them as an equal part of the professional team caring for a child.

Contributing to the overall feeling of satisfaction in fostering was whether the financial support provided by the fostering service – the allowance – covered the expenses incurred by the foster family in caring for a child.

- Evidence suggests that an insufficient allowance results in foster carers having a less positive experience - only 44% of foster carers who feel they are not fully financially supported would recommend fostering.
- Covering costs is particularly challenging for single foster carers who do not have additional sources of income.

An important factor in foster carer retention is being well-matched to meet a child in their care needs.

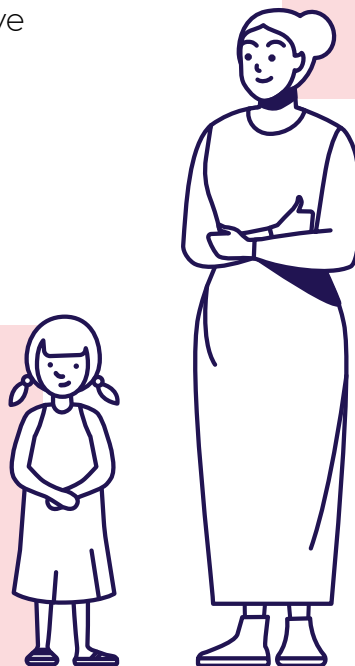
- 20% of those who had not had a positive match in the past two years would consider giving up fostering, compared to 7% who had a positive match.

44%

of foster carers who feel they are not fully financially supported would not recommend fostering.

20%

of those who had not had a positive match would consider giving up fostering.



Best practice for retention

1. Ongoing and consistent support

Proactive support at the point of need

- Proactively identify the needs of foster carers during times of crisis. Foster carers asked for more in-person visits during these moments.
- Recognise instances of blocked care where foster carers face challenges in providing optimal care before they escalate. Foster carers highlighted a lack of training for social workers in this area.
- Implement solution-focused and proactive interventions at times of concern about instability for children to prevent disruption for children and fostering families.

Out of hours support

- Provide wrap around out-of-hours support to foster carers, ensuring they have access to assistance and guidance when their assigned social worker is unavailable.
- Ensure out of hours support is proactive and not just reactive. Contact foster carers who are newly matched with a child, or those experiencing challenges and in need of increased support.

- Consider what your service has to offer out of hours which goes beyond a phone call. The Fostering Network: [The Mockingbird Programme](#) is a good example of how to build foster carers' support.

- Consider the introduction of fostering Pioneers and introducing The Fostering Network: [Fostering Wellbeing](#) programme in your service.

- The Fostering Wellbeing Pioneers are an important part of the programme. They are experienced foster carers and kinship carers who wish to contribute over and above their fostering role, to support wider activities within the service. Pioneers provide a community of support and champion the voice of fostering.
- The role of a Pioneer is viewed as a key part of the extended team around the child and utilises the unique skills and experiences that pioneers bring, reinforcing a consistent, holistic approach across the fostering sector.

- Consider a change from a service-led approach to a customer-led approach by introducing a social worker shift pattern. This would ensure that social workers are available when foster carers need support, rather than adhering strictly to traditional office hours.

- Facilitate peer support groups where foster carers can connect, share experiences and provide mutual encouragement, practical advice and emotional support.
- Encourage foster carers to identify their own support network from within their family and friends. Provide training and support to those individuals so they can care for children when the foster carer needs practical help.
- Build relationships between the support network and the service so during times of crisis the service can contact the support network directly to make arrangements.

Learning and development

- Create individualised learning and development plans that are tailored to the specific needs and preferences of each individual foster carer and child.
- Invite all members of the household and support network to training events.
- Take advantage of a range of diverse learning methods and formats which are currently available and designed to offer a more flexible learning approach, such as eLearning.

2. Respectful information sharing

Involve foster carers in all relevant meetings

- Foster carers should be actively involved in all meetings relevant to the child's well-being and development. This collaborative approach ensures that they are well-informed and have the opportunity to offer a valuable contribution to decisions that directly impact the child in their care.
- Ensure the foster carer's voice is heard, valued and championed by allocating time in every meeting to ask foster carers for their insights. Foster carers often reported feeling like their concerns were dismissed in meetings. Make time to listen and reflect on their views.
- The Fostering Network: [Fostering Wellbeing](#) brings together all the professionals involved in supporting children who are looked after, including foster carers. It promotes equality of status for everyone involved in the 'team around the child'. Fostering Wellbeing encourages professionals to work together, with a focus on improving wellbeing outcomes for children and young people.

Importance of involvement in matching

- The research showed that if foster carers felt they were not well matched to meet a child's needs, they were more likely to consider giving up fostering.
- Involving foster carers in the matching process is crucial for creating placement stability. Their insights into the child's needs, preferences, and their own strengths contribute to better-informed matching decisions, ultimately fostering a more stable placement.
- AFKA Cymru: [Increasing Placement Stability Good Practice Guide](#) offers recommendations for best matching considerations.

Delegated authority

- Foster carers should have delegated authority similar to any other parent. This means having the appropriate decision-making power to make day-to-day choices for the child, ensuring their well-being and development are addressed promptly and effectively. Ensure that delegated authority is discussed at placement planning and review meetings and child looked after reviews.

3. Finances

Timely payments

- Foster carers should receive clear and transparent communication regarding their fees and allowances. Transparency builds trust within the service and allows carers to plan their finances with confidence.
- Clearly outline the procedures for expense reimbursement. Foster carers should know what expenses are eligible, the documentation required for reimbursement and the timeline for processing such requests. Best practice in this area is to remove unnecessary paperwork and evidence. [Fees and allowances](#) | The Fostering Network
- Ensure that administrative processes are streamlined to make it as easy as possible for foster carers to access their financial support. Include accessible points of contact for any queries which may arise.

Supportive communication

- Managing household finances are often a source of stress for families and foster carers are no different. Ensure that foster carer supervision allows time for open and supportive discussions regarding any financial concerns the foster carers may have which may affect their ability to offer care.

4. Progression pathways

In instances where approved foster carers experience dissatisfaction in their role or seek to adjust their level of commitment, it is considered best practice to establish progression pathways. Some of these suggestions will require the foster carer to remain approved, whilst some may see a termination of approval with the service supporting their commitment to children in a new way.

Suggestions

- Transfer to a significant adult role and provide breaks to a small number of foster carers.
- Transition to offer parent and child placements.
- Offer community services to support children to remain at home. Such as community parent and child or The Fostering Network: [Step Up Step Down](#).
- Peer mentoring and befriending newly approved foster carers and supporting them in their role.
- Providing out-of-hours support or formalised peer mentoring roles.
- Developing local communities of foster carers, building networks and peer support groups.
- Supporting the delivery of training and inductions for new foster carers and social workers.
- Transitioning to post-18 caring.

5. Review service exits

- Foster services benefit from analysing feedback from foster carers who have left the service to gain insights into the specific reasons behind their decision. This could include factors such as support issues, personal circumstances or dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the fostering experience.
- Identifying patterns and themes provides valuable information that can guide improvements in service provision and address issues contributing to foster carer exits.
- The Fostering Network: [Foster Carer Exit Interview Toolkit](#) – A set of guidance and tools to support services to embed exit interviews into recruitment and retention practice.
- The Fostering Network: [Independent exit interview service / Gwasanaeth cyfsweliad ymadael annibynnol](#) - Providing completely independent interviews, allowing open, constructive conversations to take place and anonymous feedback into service design. The service is provided by a skilled advocacy and mediation worker, supporting and facilitating healthy endings to what can be very challenging and highly emotional experiences for everyone involved.

Current Government approaches to recruitment and retention

Recruitment and retention programme in England

The Department for Education is currently supporting the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme which seeks to encourage collaborative partnerships between local authorities. DfE have provided £35 million to create ten regional Fostering Recruitment Hubs which launched in the summer of 2024. In the autumn budget 2024⁴, the DfE announced £4 million and that they will be extending the Hubs to all regions in England.

Fostering recruitment support hubs

The Hubs involve local authorities joining together in regional clusters, which vary in size to recruit more foster carers. The clusters will redesign the journey of the prospective foster carer from the moment of initial contact through to becoming a foster carer, providing support through each stage of the journey with the aim of increasing the number of foster carers, both new and retained where children need them. The Fostering Recruitment Support Hub should cover the foster carers journey from initial enquiry through to application and be a centrally-run 'front door' to foster care recruitment across each local authority cluster. This means having a single point of contact for those enquiring to foster, and ongoing

emotional and practical advice on the approval process. DfE also wants local authorities to standardise processes and work towards agreeing common terms and conditions.

Each hub will also run a foster care recruitment communications campaign to drive interest to Recruitment Support Hubs and boost the number of quality enquiries.

Mockingbird

A key part of the Hubs plans to improve retention are the investment in the Mockingbird programme. Mockingbird is a global award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK which delivers sustainable foster care structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. There is a lot of evidence⁵ that demonstrates that participation in a Mockingbird constellation improves the retention of foster carers and the well-being of care experienced children. The DfE is aiming for 200 Mockingbird constellations to be in place across England by 2025, after funding 97 new constellations as part of the Hubs. Each Hub will have a Mockingbird constellation if they do not already.

⁴ <https://www.mutualventures.co.uk/post/ten-fostering-recruitment-hubs>

⁵ https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/Mockingbird%20Impact%20Report_2022.pdf

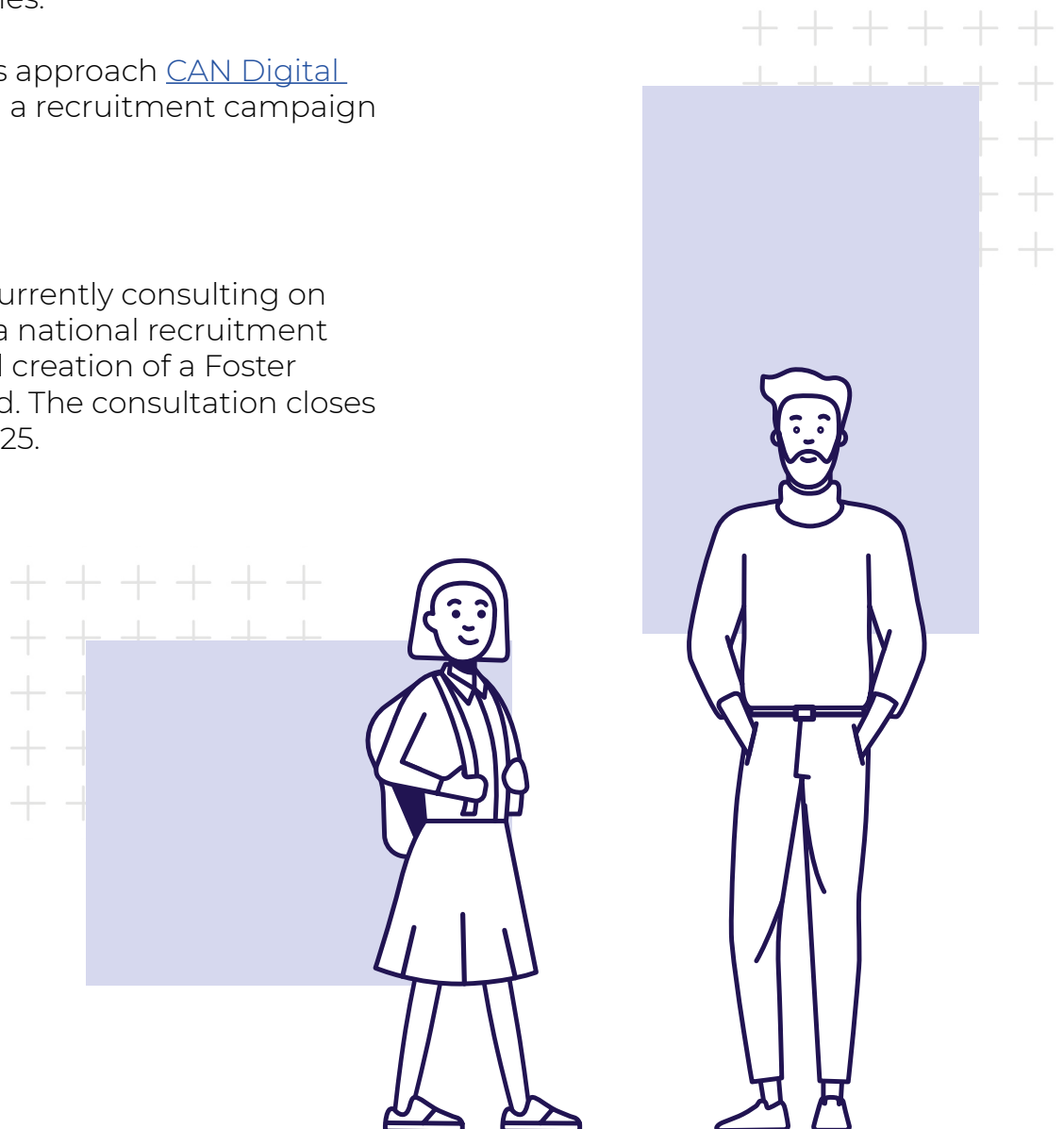
Foster Wales

[Foster Wales](#) is a national example of this approach. This collaboration saw all 22 local authorities in Wales create a single, consistent brand for local authority fostering that built familiarity and authority. They created ongoing national advertising and marketing campaigns to raise awareness that the best way to foster is with your local authority fostering team. Foster Wales has made a national impact across Wales by emphasising the advantages of dedicated, local expertise and community roles.

To support this approach [CAN Digital](#) has developed a recruitment campaign model.

Scotland

Scotland are currently consulting on the roll out of a national recruitment campaign and creation of a Foster Scotland brand. The consultation closes in February 2025.



Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

Appendices



Initial Contact and Home Visit Form

Part 1: Initial contact details

Personal details	1st Applicant	2nd Applicant
First name(s)		
Current surname (last name or family name)		
Any previous names (if applicable)		
Other names known by		
Preferred names		
Date of Birth		
Present address		
Contact details: Telephone number Email address		
Preferred means of contact	Phone Email	Phone Email

Part 2: Home visit form

Guidance – This form should be used to fulfil the ‘application’ process. It should be completed during the home visit and shared with the applicants to confirm they agree with the content. A home visit should always include an opportunity to meet everyone in the applicants’ home, including children. This should be considered an assessment of suitability and therefore be undertaken by a suitably qualified person.

Date and time of visit:	
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Name of staff member undertaking visit:

Names of family members and others present:

Basic information

Motivations to foster
Why do the applicant(s) wish to become a foster carer(s)? And why now? Did anything prompt the applicant(s) to make contact at this time? How does everyone in the house feel about fostering?
Discuss and record the response and your observations:

The household Children

Name of child	Date of birth	Name & address of current school/ nursery/childcare provision

Details of other household members

Names	Date of birth	Relationship

Household pets

Type of pet	Temperament	Any safety considerations

Explain the need to complete an animal assessment.
Complete

Do the applicant(s) have any concerns about completing an animal assessment?

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

The fostering role

What is the applicant(s) current understanding of the foster carer role?

Explain children may have experienced trauma such as abuse and neglect and describe how trauma can affect behaviour. Invite the applicant to consider how they would manage behaviour that challenges, in a way that meets the child's emotional needs.

Have the applicants considered their own children and the potential effects on them, such as the ability to change routines and lifestyles? Will they be included in discussions regarding this? The whole family is involved in the fostering role.

Do the applicants understand that fostering involves working in partnership with parents and professionals.

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Potential impact of the fostering role

What impact do the applicant(s) think fostering could have on their family, for instance the potential impact on

- School age children, adult children and grandchildren
- Sharing parents, would this invoke feelings that their children may find difficult to manage

Explain the potential impact of protective caring considerations and the impact of potential allegations.

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Own Family or childcare experience

What experience do the applicant(s) have of looking after their own, or other people's children?

What do they do as a family for activities and how often?

What does a general week and weekend involve, how do they spend their time?

What are their attitudes to parenting?

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Home and locality

What space is available for fostering?

Is the home warm and welcoming for a child? What are the current family's sleeping arrangements? Do any children in the home share a room or will they need to share a room to be able to foster?

Are the applicant(s) considering any changes to the family home or location?

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Health and Safety - home check

Look around the home, garden and in any out houses on the property

Are there any obvious hazards?

No

Yes

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Is there any ongoing building work or is there any planned for the near future?
What is the general cleanliness of the house and garden?

Explain it is essential for a full Health and Safety checks to be completed which will include an electrical safety report and a gas safety certificate.

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Support networks

What support networks do the applicant(s) have locally? How often do they use them? What is the availability of babysitters both in the daytime and in the evenings? What are school pickup arrangements? Do wider family members support with the above or are they able to support? Where do they get their practical and emotional support?

Explain interviews and checks must be carried out and the importance of having a support network to support them to foster and remain resilient.

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Diversity and Inclusion

Explore the applicant(s) views regarding multicultural society and diversity, equity and inclusion. Please include discussion regarding the below (influenced by the Social Graces, the work of John Burnham 2012).

- Gender
- Race
- Religion
- Appearance
- Ability and disability
- Class and culture
- Ethnicity
- Sexuality and sexual orientation and
- Substance use and mental health

It will be helpful to give examples of scenarios.

How will the applicant demonstrate their inclusivity and their flexibility? Do they identify any learning needs?

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Significant previous relationships

There is a need to contact ex-partners for references. Do the applicant(s) have any issues or concerns about their ex-partners being contacted? Do they know ex-partners addresses and contact details so referencing checks can be completed?

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Literacy and the foster caring role

What level of literacy does each applicant have? Do they feel they have the ability to complete recordings and how would they rate their computer literacy? How do they feel about attending meetings and advocating for the child in their care? Confirm training will be given, in these areas.

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Qualifications

Have the applicants attended any training, or do they have any qualifications, or learning from employment experiences that you think might be relevant to fostering?

Make the applicants aware they must attend introduction to foster training, provide details of the requirements for the commitment to ongoing training. Will the applicants require any particular adjustments to facilitate their attendance and full participation in training? Please explore this sensitively.

Discuss and record the response and your observations:

Health

General questions	1st Applicant	2nd Applicant
Name and Address of current GP		
How is the applicant(s) health at present? Explain there will be a need for a full medical, this will include physical, mental and wellbeing health checks.		
How do the applicant(s) manage stress? Record coping mechanisms that maintain wellbeing.		
Are the applicant(s) smokers? Explain the restrictions of caring for children under 5 years.		
Are the applicant(s) registered as disabled? What support needs will they have to enable them to foster?		
Are the applicant(s) currently under medical supervision, or attending their GP regularly for any reason?		
Are the applicant(s) currently prescribed any medication by their GP?	Yes No	Yes No
Is this medication repeat medication, or short-term medication?	Short term medication: Long term (repeat) medication:	Short term medication: Long term (repeat) medication:

Cautions and Convictions

Have the applicant(s), or any member of the household, ever been cautioned, had a criminal conviction or been the subject to a criminal enquiry? If so, please give details below. (The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 does not apply to people who will have access to children, so even minor offences, or those which took place a long time ago must be disclosed). Although these questions must be asked, be mindful regarding the sensitivity of these questions.

Name	Date of caution, conviction or enquiry	Details of caution, conviction or enquiry

Disqualification from caring for children

Have the applicants, or any members of the applicant's household ever been disqualified from caring for children or young people?

Name	Date of caution, conviction or enquiry	Details of caution, conviction or enquiry

Final points

Explain	Complete
What will happen next in the process and give a timescale for when you will next contact the applicants.	Yes No
Confirm the training that will need to be attended and when they will receive confirmation of training dates.	Yes No
What the assessment involves and the expected timescales, including home visits. Health and Safety checks, DBS requirements, references and medical assessments.	Yes No
Give details of your contact information so any follow-up questions can be answered.	Yes No
<p>Explain the difference between the two primary types of fostering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short term – transitional fostering, this includes, caring for children for a day, week, year or more but always with the knowledge that they will need the skills to support them to transition, e.g. Parent and Child, short breaks, assessment placements. • Long term – permanence fostering, this includes providing a family for a child until adulthood and beyond. Long term fostering for those wishing to provide long term stability to a child. 	Yes No

Assessment of home visit:

Analysis

Please detail the potential strengths and challenges to the application that are apparent at this early stage. Refer to the applicant(s) responses and your observations.

Recommendation

Please detail the reasons for your recommendation. If appropriate, include required actions that may address any challenges detailed above.

Potential suitability:

Types of fostering	Agree	Reason
Short term		
Long term		

Proceed to training?

Yes

No

Managers comments

Fostering Assessment Quality Assurance (QA) Checks

Name of applicant(s)	
Name of assessor	

Name of QA supervisor		Date of QA	
Name of QA manager		Date of QA	

	Complete	QA - Identified gaps or changes required
Summary sheet for panel		
Recommendation for approval status meets best practice		
Factual information complete and accurate		
Background information complete and accurate		
Suitability analysis sufficient		
DBS for applicants and all over 18s		
Local authority checks		
Other statutory checks		
Financial assessment		
Chronology		
Genogram		
Ecomap		
Health & Safety check including gas and electric checks		
Pet assessments		
Adult health reports		
Preparation to foster training feedback		

	Complete	QA - Identified gaps or changes required
Personal development plan/Learning and development plan completed for year ahead		
Personal references		
Family references		
Previous partner references		
Adult children references		
Interview with personal references		
Interview with family references		
Interview with adult children		
Direct work with birth/ adopted /stepchildren in the home/ regular visitors		
Stepchildren/adult stepchildren reference		
Current employment reference		
Previous employment reference (if worked with children and vulnerable adults, or other relevant sector)		
Health visitor reference		
School reference		
Support network assessment, including all required checks as per local practice		

	Complete	QA - Identified gaps or changes required
DBS of regular visitors to home, adult children in the home, identified support network		
Family Plans (Protective Care) created and signed		
Welcome book/video		
Other documents – if applicable		
Transfer reference letter from previous fostering service		
Transfer protocol meeting minutes		
Parent & child assessment		
Long-term/permanence fostering assessment		
Children with disabilities/specialist needs assessment		

■ Key Performance Indicator Monthly Returns

Key Performance Indicator (KPI) monthly returns are the foundation of data-driven decision-making. Collecting these returns provides essential data that informs practice, supports strategic planning, and enhances service quality.

The data gathered helps services refine recruitment strategies, streamline approval processes, and ensure children in care receive the right support in a timely manner. This information strengthens service provision, supports cost-effective planning, and upholds quality standards in fostering.

Key Performance Indicator (KPI) monthly return data should include the following:

Tracking Recruitment Progress

- The number of initial enquiries received and their sources help services understand the effectiveness of marketing and recruitment strategies. This data highlights where potential foster carers learn about fostering opportunities, allowing for more targeted marketing efforts.
- The number of initial visits completed within or outside agreed timeframes provides insight into the service's responsiveness. Prompt follow ups are often linked to higher engagement and better retention of interested applicants.

Identifying Barriers and Delays

- Recording the number of initial visits outside agreed timeframes and the reasons for delays can highlight resource constraints or issues within recruitment processes. This real time data enables improvements to processes, workflows, and timeliness of visits.

Monitoring Conversion Rates

- Identifying the number of closed initial visits and the reasons for closures provides a clear picture of why potential carers may not proceed. If applicants disengage due to service related factors, this information can inform changes in communication strategies, recruitment processes, and early applicant support to improve conversion rates.

Measuring Retention and Approvals

- Tracking assessments completed within and outside of agreed timeframes provides key information on the length of the approval process. Identifying reasons for extended assessments helps improve efficiency and reduce delays.
- Monitoring new foster carer approvals and the number of children and young people placed,

tracks recruitment outcomes and the service's capacity to place children with suitable carers. Knowing how many carers are successfully recruited and retained informs effective workforce planning.

Improving Outcomes for Children

- Ultimately, monthly KPI returns help fostering services remain responsive to children's needs by continuously improving recruitment, approval, and support processes. Effective monitoring leads to better matching, increased stability, and improved outcomes for children in care.





About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation. We were founded 50 years ago by foster carers, for foster carers, and our access to governments and policy makers in all four nations of the United Kingdom gives us an unrivalled ability to lead the change necessary to make foster care the best it can be.

We believe that relationships are the golden thread running through every fostering story and are dedicated to supporting, enriching, empowering and, where necessary, restoring the vital bonds between those who work together to offer love, warmth, stability and hope to children and young people.



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