

Together for Children

Thinking about Fostering?

Information Pack for Prospective Foster Carers

We have designed this Information pack to provide the full range of information you may need to start thinking about fostering for Together for Children.

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What is Foster Care?

Foster care is one of several care options for a child who is looked after by the Local Authority, when they cannot live at home, or with family, for a period of time. Foster care is family based care, and is with people who have been approved to become foster carers, following a thorough assessment to check that the parent(s) and home are going to be safe and suitable for accommodating looked after children.

Foster carers look after children in their home, and so it is important that not only the prospective foster parents are involved in the assessment, but also that the household and all household members are considered too. Any birth children of foster carers will “share” their parents with the children who are placed, and they often have a great part to play in the experience of family life for looked after children.

Foster carers look after the children on a day to day basis- making meals, providing basic care, and routines, and taking children to school, nursery or other education/training arrangements. Foster carers make sure that children have the opportunity to play, or relax, and that they have a healthy lifestyle. Foster carers also seek to build trusting relationships with the children they look after, as many of them requiring this care need help, love, time to trust, and patience.

Children who need foster care

- All of the children requiring foster care are looked after by the Local Authority* and require a period of time living with alternative carers, often while plans are made for their future.
- Some of the children have to live away from parents and family by direction of the Court, due to concerns about the parenting they have received, which may have involved abuse or neglect. Some of the children are placed with the agreement of parents, who agree to “voluntary” accommodation of the child, while assessments and planning is underway. All of the children who are looked after by the Local Authority have a social worker, who is responsible for care planning, and assessment to determine the best possible future options for the child.
- The children may be any age from just a day old, to 18 years of age.

Together For Children needs foster carers who can meet the needs of babies, toddlers, primary aged children, and teenagers.

- The children may require placement with their siblings, or alone.

Together for Children needs foster carers for sibling groups, and for children who need to be placed on their own.

- Children may be white British, or may be from an ethnic minority group. They may be from different religious backgrounds, or have no particular religion.

Together for Children needs foster carers from a range of ethnic backgrounds- white families, and Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority parents. We also need foster carers from different religions, but all of our foster carers may be asked to support the religious needs and customs of the child's origins.

- Children may have a variety of needs- they may have a disability, or learning difficulties.

Together for Children require foster carers who may be experienced in working with, or looking after disabled children, or supporting children with additional needs, to achieve their potential.

- What we know is that for all children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or separation from parents and carers they will experience emotional distress, and often feel quite traumatised. They need the love, patience and understanding of supportive foster carers, to help them feel safe, and begin to achieve the stability and consistency they need in life.

*There are a small number of children living with birth family who require short breaks in foster care, to provide support to families and children in stress, and help keep families and children together. These children may be disabled children, and may not be looked after by the Local Authority.

Different types of Foster Care

Because children come into foster care for very different reasons, and through a variety of care planning arrangements, there are different kinds of foster care that are required to meet the individual needs of each child, requiring placement.

➤ Short Term Foster Care

Short term foster care is usually a temporary foster care arrangement, where the child or children come to stay with foster carers for a time limited period. Parents may be temporarily unable to care for their child, for example due to mental or physical illness. In other circumstances a temporary placement is required while assessment and care planning is progressed. Assessments may be underway with birth parents, to determine whether they can make the changes needed to meet their children's needs, for example, learning parenting techniques; breaking dependency on drugs or alcohol; or ending abusive relationships within the home.

Short term foster carers may work with birth parents, and support contact arrangements by helping children to prepare for contact, or by taking children to contact. Birth parents often value the role of the foster carers, and foster carers can play a crucial role in helping children to talk safely about feelings they have about their circumstances.

The law requires that children and young people do not have unlimited temporary care, and that they are entitled to permanence, which creates stability.

Therefore, for many children, they come into a short term placement, but care planning then goes on to explore the option for the same foster carers to provide a long term, or permanent placement, if the child is unable to achieve permanence through a return home.

➤ **Permanent and Long Term Foster Care**

Some foster carers want to offer a long term or permanent home to children, and are motivated to provide loving care to a child or children over the duration of their childhoods, through to age 18 or beyond. Many children need this stability and permanence.

For younger children, adoption is the most likely care plan where they are unable to return home. However, for some children permanent fostering may be the best plan to meet their needs, particularly where they still identify with birth family, require some contact, or do not want a new “Mum and Dad”. These children still need to put down roots, and have stability and a consistent and loving family in which they belong. Becoming a permanent foster family involves making a long term commitment to the child or children who are placed, and being prepared to work through any difficulties that arise, with support from the Fostering Service and the child’s social worker. Permanent foster care can be extremely rewarding and make a huge difference to a child’s life. Permanence may continue beyond the age of 18, when the child ceases to be looked after, but as with most young people, continues to need the support, help, and encouragement of “parents” as they make the transition to adulthood.

➤ **Parent and Child Fostering**

There are times when a young parent (most usually the mother) needs to be placed in foster care, during the later stages of pregnancy, and when the baby is born, through the early stages of life. Parent and child fostering is a specialist type of fostering, with the primary focus being to support the parent in the parenting task, and in developing parenting skills. Often, these placements involve the foster carer helping the young parent, but also in contributing to the assessment of parenting skills – an assessment which may be requested by the baby’s social worker, or by the Court. Foster carers for Parent and Child placements will require specialist training, and skills, to enable them to carry out this role.

➤ **Fostering Teenagers**

Although fostering teenagers will essentially be as a short term or long term/permanent foster carer, it is worth explaining that most teenagers who are looked after are placed within foster care, and many become looked after for the first time as teenagers. There may be many reasons that a teenager becomes looked after- they may have experienced or disclosed abuse; sometimes parents under stress cannot cope with some of the teenage challenges; or an adoption family unit has broken down. Teenagers in today's society face many challenges and pressures, and parents can themselves find it difficult to cope with the behaviours and needs of their teenage children. There can be negative societal images of teenagers, however, they are often in need of strong, stable adults who can care with sensitivity, understanding and a good sense of humour. They are at a rapidly developing stage of their lives, facing adulthood, and often feeling vulnerable and unprepared, while having to manage complex social relationships and expectations, as well as crucial school exams. Skilled and supportive adults, who can draw on their own feelings and earlier experiences to guide and encourage the young person can make a real difference to the lives and futures of teenagers.

➤ **Short Break and Respite Foster Care**

Some children living at home with parents, or accommodated in foster care, benefit from periods of short break, or respite, away from the primary family unit in which they live most of the time. Short breaks can give the family and the young person some time apart, which can be invaluable when the needs of the child are complex. Some people may wish to foster only on a short term basis- perhaps one or two weekends per month, but this can offer invaluable support to children and families. Short break carers may be motivated to care for children with disabilities for example, due to experience of children in their working, family or community lives. Alternatively, becoming a short break carer for looked after children already in foster care may be a way of finding out more about the role of a foster carer, or contributing something to children who need this, even if full time fostering is not right at this time.

The role of the Foster Carer- how do Foster Carers help children?

- Foster carers look after children, and meet their day to day care needs.
- Foster carers listen to children, and let them know they are the most important person when it comes to the child's wishes and future plans.
- They help children to develop better relationships, and to develop relationship skills. They seek to provide a secure relationship with and for the child, as a base for managing personal growth.
- They support children to achieve their best in school, nursery, or college and employment, by showing an interest, encouraging them, and helping find solutions to problems.
- They help children to be the healthiest they can be, by encouraging and providing a good diet, encouraging exercise, and good mental health and wellbeing.
- They safeguard children in many ways. This can be through establishing a safe household, safe care arrangements, and encouraging learning about dangers and sensible risk taking.
- Foster carers also look out for specific safeguarding issues such as risks of abuse, or a child going missing from home, for example.
- Foster carers work together with others to make sure that the child has the right level of contact with anyone important to them, or that they know why contact is restricted if it needs to be.
- Foster carers encourage children to have hobbies, leisure interests and activities and take them to these.
- Foster carers encourage independence skills in children and young people, appropriate to their age and capacity.
- Foster carers develop a sufficient understanding of social media and technology, to enable them to be aware of the child's world, and communicate effectively via electronic means, such as e mail.
- Foster carers develop their own skills through learning, training and other personal development, to make sure they keep up to speed with caring for children and meeting their needs.
- Foster carers work with a range of professionals and act professionally in meetings and contacts with others. Working together with others is a key part of the role.

New foster carers are supported and helped to develop into the role by their own allocated Fostering Social Worker and others in the team. No one is expected to know everything from the outset, and it is only through time and experience that foster carers develop the full range of skills required. Like other roles in life, continuous learning and development is a feature of being a foster carer.

Who can become a Foster Carer?

- ✓ The law says you must be over 21 to foster.
- ✓ You can foster if you are in a couple, who has been living together for 2 years or more and are in a stable relationship
- ✓ You can foster as a single person.
- ✓ You can foster as a gay, lesbian, bi sexual, or transgender person.
- ✓ You can foster even if you don't have your own children, although some experience of children will be necessary.
- ✓ You can foster as long as you live in a property, which has a spare bedroom. Your property can be rented or owned, including through mortgage. Where the property is rented, the owner's permission is required.
- ✓ You can foster and work in another job. The assessment will explore how you will meet the needs of children and what age of child would be suitable to foster, alongside your working role.
- ✓ You can foster if you have been divorced, or are separated from an ex-partner.
- ✓ You can foster if you have children living elsewhere. The assessment will explore their arrangements, and needs.

Together for Children is seeking foster carers from a range of diverse backgrounds, walks of life and with different circumstances, that reflect the community of Sunderland City, and surrounding areas. We need foster carers to provide loving homes for the 550 + looked after children and young people who require foster care.

There are very few barriers to becoming a foster carer.

The focus of the assessment is to explore with prospective foster carers their skills, circumstances and personal qualities, and how these would be used to meet the needs of a looked after child.

Steps and Stages to becoming a Foster Carer

Initial Telephone Call

Once we have received your initial enquiry, we will seek to arrange with you a convenient time to have a telephone call, to discuss your interest and circumstances further. You can expect this call to take about 30-40 minutes, and it will be with one of our friendly team. We'll ask a bit more about your interest in fostering, home and personal circumstances, and we'll explain more about the children needing foster care. This call will help you, and the Fostering Service to decide if now is the right time to proceed to the next stage.

Information Events

We hold regular Information Events, where you can come and find out more about fostering for Together for Children, and meet our team, including foster carers. You don't have to attend one of our events, but many people like to find out more in a group situation, and meet members of the team.

Initial Home Visit

We will arrange to come to your home, to have a more in depth discussion about fostering, and discuss your interest and motivation. We will need to look around your entire home, meet all adults who are to be foster carers, and we would also aim to meet with other family members living in the home too. Everything we discuss and do is to make sure we are working together transparently about those issues which are relevant and important to discuss in relation to becoming a foster carer.

This home visit further enables you to find out more about fostering and what it will mean for your lives, and for the Fostering Service to explore your values, motivation and circumstances for fostering.

Following this visit, the visiting Fostering social worker will consult with a manager to confirm the next steps. We will make a further brief call to check out your wishes and views about proceeding, and to advise of the Fostering Service confirmation to proceed. Where the Fostering Service does not feel it is right to invite your application to foster, we will be fully honest and open about the reasons why, and explain what else we think would help you to prepare for fostering.

Application – Stage 1

We will send to you, via e mail, and/or in paper copy, a Registration of Interest form, which we will invite you to complete. This form will require some detailed information, including consent to checks and references. We will require you to provide accurate dates for education, employment, any house moves, and marriages/divorces. We will require consent to seek references, and undertake checks- see below.

Once we have received your completed and signed Registration of Interest form, we will initiate checks, and **Stage 1** of the assessment will commence.

You can speed things up by starting to gather that information as soon as possible.

Checks and References

By law we are required to undertake a number of checks and references, to ensure that everyone we assess and approve as foster carers are suitable to carry out this role.

These checks are undertaken by all fostering agencies, and are part of safeguarding arrangements for looked after children.

Check required	Reason we ask
<p>You will be required to apply for an enhanced DBS, to enable work with children and vulnerable adults.</p> <p>We will pay for this check.</p>	<p>We will ask you to tell us about any prior convictions at the initial visit. Many prior convictions do not affect your ability to be a foster carer. Prior convictions which would prohibit you are outlined in schedule 2 off the Fostering Services Regulations (2011). However, we require openness about all prior convictions for this role, and failure to disclose any which later are disclosed on the DBS may jeopardise your application to foster. The reason we make this check is because it is important that those with specific sexual or violent criminal histories are not enabled to foster. Honesty is an important feature of our relationship with you as a foster carer, and any recent criminal activity will be assessed, as relating to the role.</p>
<p>You will be required to go for a medical assessment with your GP. The report will be provided to your GP and assessed by our Medical Advisor, who is a qualified Doctor.</p> <p>We will pay for this check.</p>	<p>Foster carers need to be physically and mentally fit enough and healthy enough to foster children. Where foster carers have any on-going health issues which may impact on capacity to care for a child, we have a duty of care to both the children, and to the prospective foster carer. We would not put a foster carer in the position of any serious risk of deterioration to their own health as a result of fostering, and we seek stability for children, including in relation to the long term health of their care giver.</p> <p>The medical advisor may give advice about the terms of approval, given certain health issues. For example, we will not place a child under age 5 in a smoking household.</p>
<p>You will be required to nominate 2 personal referees who have known you for at least 2 years, and a family member whom we can interview.</p>	<p>We will interview at least 3 referees, to ascertain their views about your suitability to foster, and any areas in which they think you may require additional support or help. This is a safeguarding check, and a check on your support needs.</p>
<p>Current employer, and any previous employer where work involved work with children or vulnerable adults.</p>	<p>This is a standard reference check, to confirm your capacity to manage employment, including working appropriately, honestly and managing work relationships. Also a safeguarding check for any employment with children, or vulnerable adults. Please tell us if you think there may be</p>

	any issues – they are probably not as big as you think.
Previous Partner checks – where the relationship involved living with the previous partner over age 18, or where a child was born of the relationship.	The law requires fostering agencies to undertake previous partner checks, as a safeguarding matter, as part of the assessment. The reason is to check on any prior history of domestic or child abuse, or neglect. We know that in some cases previous partner checks may raise past issues, or dynamics. We will discuss these fully with you at the initial visit and address any concerns or risks you have about the checks. Together for Children aims to be sensitive in relation to prior relationships, while recognising the importance of these in the assessment process.
Education reference	This will be required for any school that a child of the prospective foster carer attends. This is to contribute to an assessment of the priority given to education, and any needs of the birth child in relation to education.
Local Authority check – including previous LA where resident within last 10 years	A check is made with Together for Children, to check if the family is known for any safeguarding matter. Prior LA's lived within over the last 10 years are checked for the same reason. We ask for honest disclosure in relation to any previous safeguarding involvement, which will not necessarily mean you cannot foster.
Ofsted	Together for Children will make a check with Ofsted, as they may hold information in relation to individuals, if they have worked in a registered position.
NSPCC	A check is made with the NSPCC, as they have a statutory role in safeguarding nationally.
CAFCASS	This is family court service, and we complete a standard check with this agency, as they may have prior involvement and relevant information, in relation to private law regarding your children. Please let us know if they have been involved.

This sounds like a lot of checking, but it is a standard requirement across all fostering agencies, and is all about making sure that the right people are fostering children.

Some applicants may have one or two matters that we want to talk about, but usually their worries are not a barrier to fostering.

Stage 2

Once we have received all your checks and references, plus the medical advisors report, we are in a position to formally start Stage 2 of the assessment. We have to make a decision to progress to Stage 2, and you will be notified in writing that all checks are now returned, and we are happy to proceed to Stage 2.

Stage 2 involves a qualified and experienced social worker coming out to your home over a series of meetings, to talk more in depth with you, and your partner, if you are

applying as a couple, about your lives, backgrounds, how you were brought up, and what makes you the people you are today. The visits will be planned in advance with you, and you'll know when the social worker is coming. You'll also probably get to know what tea and biscuits they like, as you'll be spending a lot of time in discussion during this stage!

This process is sometimes called the Form F "Home study" assessment, and you will be asked to do some thinking, and planning following each session, to contribute your views to the final assessment report.

The social worker will also want to talk to your children or other family members living in your home, together and without you there. The social worker will meet with each of you as partners alone on one occasion during the assessment.

The assessment helps build up a good picture about you, and your family, and about what ages and numbers of children you may be able to look after, and what needs you can confidently meet.

The social worker will complete the assessment report, called the Form F, and provide it to you to read and confirm you are satisfied it is accurate. The only sections you won't get to read are the references.

Skills to Foster Training

We run a training course to help prepare people for fostering, and to find out more about what is involved and the needs of children who have come to be looked after, and may have experienced abuse and neglect, but have also experienced separation and loss. The training will help you and your assessor to provide evidence in your assessment of your understanding about meeting the needs of looked after children.

This course is run over a series of sessions, totalling 5 full days, but dependent upon each group may be run over shorter evening sessions, or weekends. We want it to be accessible to all of our applicants.

We know that training and learning environment may be an experience for some that conjures up feelings of going back to school. Our groups are friendly, our style of training is designed to put the group at ease, and get the most out of the opportunity to hear more about fostering, including from some of our own very valued foster carers.

We do expect both partners to attend all training sessions, and make arrangements to enable this to happen. You may also wish to bring along older children and young people- the course would be suitable for anyone in the home over the age of 16 years, although it is geared towards the adult foster carers.

If you have already completed the Initial Preparation Course, perhaps in another agency, or through Together for Children, we will discuss with you what shorter training we would require, to support evidence in your Form F assessment of your understanding of the needs of looked after children.

You won't need to complete the full course again, and any training we ask you to do will because we think it will help you foster for Together for Children.

Transferring from another Agency

Some foster carers decide that they are not fully satisfied with the agency they are currently fostering with and want to explore options to change. Some may be looking after children who are placed by Together for Children, Sunderland, and want to consider now fostering for us too. Others may be fostering for an independent agency, but find they are not getting enough placements, or there are other issues.

We are confident that we can keep foster carers busy with placements, subject to their own family and personal circumstances being suitable, and we want to encourage foster carers to work with their preferred agency of choice. The Government encouraged greater flexibility for foster carers in 2013, and we have now made sure that where experienced foster carers want to transfer to Together for Children, we make this as streamlined as possible.

We will undertake an Initial Visit at your request, and discuss with you your experience of fostering, and reasons for wanting to transfer. Following this initial visit, we will request that you notify your current fostering agency in writing of your intention to begin transfer arrangements in line with Fostering Network's Transfer protocol (<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/recruitment-and-retention/transfer-protocols>)

Our approach will be to ensure that we have good information from your previous agency, which will include reading files, and getting a reference from them. We will usually undertake a new Form F assessment, unless your existing Form F is less than 12 months old, in which case we will seek permission to obtain that. We will gather information about your training record, and any placements you have had with your existing agency, as evidence of your competence for fostering, which will be included in your new Form F.

We will only take up references previously obtained if we feel they are now out of date, or may have changed, materially, in the period since you last applied to foster.

We will need to take up DBS checks and obtain a new medical report.

The Homestudy assessment will be conducted in a shorter time period, and will be condensed, in recognition of your experience of fostering, and transfer process.

You may have children in placement during this period, and we will make sure their needs are central to the process of transfer. It's vital that children are not disrupted by any transfer arrangements, and that their welfare is paramount.

Where there are children, the Fostering Network Protocol and principles will apply.

Fostering Panel

In order to be approved as a foster carer, the application and assessment must be considered by the Fostering Panel. The Panel is a body of people who have experience relevant to fostering, and/or looked after children, and who will read the full assessment report and consider any questions or matters they need to check. The role of Panel is to make a recommendation as to whether the applicants should be approved as foster carers, and what age ranges and numbers of children they should be approved to look after.

Applicants are invited and encouraged to attend the Panel meeting, and will be asked about any further information Panel want to consider.

Finally, once Panel have made their recommendation, a senior manager within Together for Children makes the decision, and the foster carers are approved, and ready to start fostering.

Timescales

Our aim is to assess, prepare and approve foster carers as quickly and smoothly as possible, whilst ensuring that you get the very best out of the preparation period.

We set the following timescales for each stage:

Stage 1	8 weeks from receipt of your application
Stage 2	Assessment completed, written and quality assured within 13 weeks
Provision of assessment to you for reading	1 week
Submission to Panel	At least 5 working days before Panel
Agency Decision on approval	within 10 days of Panel

- ✓ This enables us to assure that the fully completed assessment will take no longer than 24 weeks to get to Panel, and a further 2 weeks to confirm approval.
- ✓ For Transfer In foster carers, we will aim to complete the whole process within 14 weeks.

Getting Started – Working together with others in Together for Children

As a foster carer you won't be alone, and left to work out what you need to do without any guidance, or support.

When you are coming up to approval, the Team Manager will allocate to you a named, qualified Fostering Social Worker, who will be your support, and supervisor in your role as foster carer. This will usually be the Social Worker who has done your assessment with you.

You will also be asked to join training, and support groups, and through these you will get to meet a lot of other foster carers for Together for Children. You may start to build up friendships with other foster carers you did your Skills to Foster training with - that isn't uncommon. What is clear is that foster carers almost always build up a range of close friends and others in the Fostering community, who you can start to share activities with, turn to for advice, and generally have a lot of fun.

There are also a range of other professionals who you will get to know and will form part of the working network for you. There will be children's social workers, managers of the service, health professionals, teachers, and Independent Reviewing officers who you will start to work with.

We provide induction into the role of a foster carer in Together for Children, so that you can be guided and advised about what to do, and what is expected.

How children are placed with foster carers

Children requiring foster care may already be looked after in another foster placement, or they may come into care for the very first time, from home. In most cases, the child's social worker will have assessed the child's needs, and will already have a plan, called the Care Plan. Sometimes that isn't the case, and foster carers are the first people who will start to get a really good understanding of that child, other than their birth parents, and family.

We look to find the right foster carers who can meet the needs of the child, including things like where their school is, and how long it will take to get there, or whether children need to be placed with siblings.

This process is called "matching" and we talk to foster carers about possible referrals of children, who's needs we think will be well matched with what a foster carer has to offer.

Wherever possible we aim to introduce the child to their new foster carers before they move in to live with them. We will also ask you to prepare a child friendly "Profile" which can be shared with children before they come to live with you. We will

also try and arrange for you to meet the child's birth parents, or current foster carers, so you can find out more about what they like, and need.

Sometimes, it is not possible to introduce the child and foster carers before placement, and an Emergency placement is required. We will also talk to you when you are approved about your availability to take children at very short notice, because we know this sometimes is required, following a breakdown elsewhere.

Whatever the circumstances, foster carers will work very hard to try and reassure the child, or young person, help them to settle in, and start to understand their routines, so that children can get into their day to day lives again.

Either just before or just after placement, there will be a Placement Agreement Meeting where everyone will meet together to discuss what the child needs, and how foster carers will help and support the child's day to day arrangements, and their care plan.

Support for Children

Once a child is looked after, they will have an allocated social worker, who foster carers will work closely with.

Their school will also be informed that they are looked after, if they were not already aware, and will be an important member of the care team.

There may also be other professionals around to help children- for example a psychologist, health care professional or other therapist.

Of course, birth family also have a role in supporting children, and arrangements for contact will be part of the child's plan.

Support for Foster Carers

The service will support foster carers in a range of ways.

All foster carers have a named allocated Fostering Social worker, who will make planned visits, on a regular basis. The Fostering Social Worker will provide supervision- talking about the ways in which foster carers are helping children, and any training, or additional help required. They will also provide support, listen to how it is for the foster carer, and are available by telephone, when required.

The team also have a duty service, both during the day time, and out of hours. This means that support is available 24/7.

There is a Foster Care Support Line which may be accessed out of hours, with access to additional help and advice from our one of own experienced foster carers.

We run support groups, activities, and events, and encourage foster carers to attend and get as much out of them as possible.

Training and Development

There is now a much greater recognition of the vital role that foster carers play in the lives of children. We know that foster carers need to be trained in so many important aspects of looking after children, who have suffered abuse, neglect, separation and loss. All professionals working with children require training, and foster carers are no exception.

For this reason, we have invested in a renewed training programme for our foster carers- which includes Induction Training; training in a range of matters affecting children which we want all foster carers to know, and then some additional training, which will be of interest to foster carers looking after children in specific circumstances.

All foster carers will be supported to complete the national Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS) programme in the first year of fostering.

We have reviewed and revised our Personal Development approach for foster carers, to make sure that we are doing our very best to equip foster carers to meet the needs of the children they are caring for, and to build on their learning and experience over time.

All of our training is free to foster carers, and over time our valued foster carers will receive high quality, often accredited training, which builds their skills and experience in working with children.

Foster Care Payments and Allowances

Together for Children places great value on our foster carers. We know that there is a cost to caring for a child, who is looked after, including meeting their day to day needs, for food, clothing, travel to and from school, and also a contribution to the cost of utilities etc.. in the fostering household.

We pay all foster carers the Governments National Minimum Allowance for the age of the child, and uplift this whenever the Government raises the payment level.

This allowance is generous and is deemed to cover the cost of the care of the child.

Skills Levels and progression

In addition to the Fostering Allowance we have set out a scheme of fee structure, to recognise the contribution that foster carers make in the lives of children.

Fostering is not “employment”, but foster carers open their homes and lives to children, and we fully recognise the huge contribution they make to helping children recover from harm, re-establish better relationships, and develop emotionally and physically healthy lives.

Our Skills levels are currently under review, and further information will be provided at the time of the Initial Visit.

Tax and National Insurance

Foster carers are classed as self-employed, for the purposes of HMRC. Almost all income from fostering is exempt from tax, and so in considering the “affordability” of fostering, applicants may want to consider the equivalent salary, if they were occupied in alternative employment. Not only is there an allowance of £10,000 per annum, tax free for fostering, there is additionally a weekly tax free allowance, for each child, dependent on the age of the child. Foster carers may, therefore receive up to £25,000, for example, with no tax to pay (Example illustrated on HMRC website, link below)

The government allocates a contribution to National Insurance Credits for foster carers, which means that fostering is recognised for the purposes of building up a state pension.

To get more information, see www.hmrc/foster-carers/help-with-the-cost-of-fostering

Benefits

People who are benefits may not automatically lose those benefits if they start to foster. The exception is job seekers allowance- a foster carer who has a child in placement will usually not be available for new work.

To get more information, see www.hmrc/foster-carers/claiming-benefits-while-fostering

Payments

Payments are made to foster carers directly to the bank account, on a monthly basis.

Becoming Part of the Foster Care Community in Sunderland

We hope that you have enjoyed reading all about becoming a foster carer, and what the process involves.

Foster carers are a hugely valued sector of our City and surrounding areas, and make a real difference to the lives of vulnerable children in Sunderland. Foster carers will experience many challenges and sometimes need to offload, and talk about how they are feeling. That's why we put so much emphasis on our Fostering Social Workers- being there for foster carers.

We really mean it when we say “Together For Children”.

February 2018

Our foster carers describe feeling very personally rewarded by the progress that children make as a result of the loving and stable relationships they build with them. While there can be some challenges, overall there is a great deal of satisfaction, a sense of belonging and really living the values of care, and “putting something back”.

As our new company, Together for Children, starts to set out a direction for the future, our Board of Directors are determined that the City will recognise the needs of looked after children, for a wide range of supports in our communities, and that there will be a City wide value and support to the work of the Fostering Service.

It's a great time to think about being part of the “Together” in Together for Children!

Frequently Asked Questions

Is there an upper age limit to fostering?

No. You need to be healthy and have the right attitude to helping children and young people. Often people in their later years have a great deal of experience, although we have to recognise that fostering does require stamina, and the physical and mental energy required to meet the needs of children.

Can I foster if I have a dog?

Yes. We assess pets too!. What we need to check out is that your dog is not a dangerous breed, and that it will be safe and content to have new children in your family. We also need to know its habits and routines, and any factors that could be risky to a child, or to your dog. We assess all pets in the home, as part of our assessment, but many children enjoy living with pets.

What happens if I don't have a placement, and drop my income for a while?

In preparing to foster you need to think about your income and outgoings, and what you need to live on. We can provide information about fees and allowances, but these are payable when you are caring for a child. You may want to work, alongside fostering, but we ask you to talk to us about what this entails, so we know what it means for any children placed. You can also claim benefits when you don't have a placement.

Can I foster if I smoke?

Yes, but it won't come as a surprise that we encourage smokers to give up. You will not be able to have a child under 5 placed in a smoking household, and we also require that no smoking takes place in the home.

Do I need to be able to drive to foster?

The answer is no, but it helps. All of our children are placed from the Sunderland area, and are likely to have school arrangements within the city. However, this may still be a few miles away, and foster carers manage day to day life with the children more easily if they have access to a car. We do however, recognise the value of teaching children to travel on public transport, and this may be your preferred method of getting around.

Do I have to take the child to school?

Wherever possible we want foster carers to act as good parents and take children to school, dependent on age and stage of development. It helps children feel more secure, and foster carers to have daily contact with schools, and everything that is going on there.

Can the child go to school closer to where I live?

Schools, teachers and friends can be very important and stable elements of a child's life, especially when they have had to move into foster care. We all avoid changes to a child's school because it is so important that they have continuity. However, where permanence is planned, this can often be a time where it is good to make sure that a child is placed in a school close to their foster home, and local community.

Can foster children share a bedroom?

Children should have their own room unless it is agreed that it is in the best interests of a child to share with a same sex sibling- perhaps because this will provide the comfort the children require. Looked after children should never have a shared bedroom with unrelated children, or with adults in the household.

The exception is babies, who may have a cot in the foster carer's room, up to age, 2, but must never share a bed.

Can I foster for Together for Children if I live outside of Sunderland or Washington?

Yes, but we would need to be sure that you could take children to school, and other arrangements. There is a need, at times, for some placements that are a little further from the City area.

Can I foster and be a child minder?

Yes, but both agencies must be aware of the arrangements, and the numbers of children placed will depend on all child caring commitments that you have. You will be registered with Ofsted as a child minder, and Ofsted also regulate fostering services. Experience as a child minder can be very valuable for fostering. However, we need to ensure that the needs of all children can be fully met and are not compromised, due to dual role.

If I find that fostering is not for me, what can I do?

We would hope to offer a lot of opportunity to talk through anything that is concerning you about fostering, and try to support and encourage your development, or different ways of approaching things. We don't give up on our foster carers, and we value the work they do very much. However, foster carers are entitled to resign, and the process is a smooth one- we just ask that foster carers talk to us about this, and that we can all work together to ensure the needs of any children are planned for, properly and in good time.

I've heard that foster carers may be the subject of allegations by the child. Is this right?

Foster carers can be subject to allegations, and these situations can be very upsetting for everyone concerned. It is a natural concern of foster carers in 2018. What we do is set out a very robust approach to safe care, and we train our foster carers in how to think about safe care, for everyone in the household, and for children placed too. We talk regularly with foster carers about safe care arrangements, and by setting out a sensible approach to the way in which children are looked after in your home, we know that this minimises risks of false allegations. We must listen to children whenever they say they have been hurt, or harmed. What we aim to do is to reduce the risk of any situation be open to misinterpretation, and seek to encourage building positive relationships with children.

Where allegations do happen, we deal with these quickly, transparently, and foster carers are offered independent support.

Can I take the child on holiday?

Yes. We encourage foster carers to build family life with children, and for many children this involves them going on holiday with the foster carer. Good planning is vital, and if going abroad there will be passport and birth parent consents to think about. The needs of the child, ensuring that holiday accommodation is going to be suitable, and ensuring that everyone who needs to be consulted is, are key to making this a very positive experience for everyone.

Can I make day to day decisions about the child's life?

Together for Children will delegate some decision making to foster carers, in respect of the child they are caring for. The extent of this will depend on a number of factors, including how long they have been with you, their legal status, and the relationship. Delegated authority matters will be discussed, and clearly set out in writing, and will be reviewed as required.