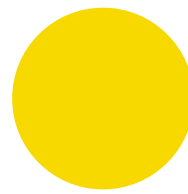




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Information and Inspiration

Everything you need to know about fostering
for your Local Council in Cheshire and Merseyside.

www.foster4.co.uk



Welcome to the fostering family...

"We're delighted you're interested in becoming a foster carer with your Local Authority. We hope that this information pack tells you everything you need to know and inspires you to take the next step.

If you have any questions at any time, please drop us a line. We're always available during office hours, 9am-5pm Monday-Friday. We're often out and about in your local communities during evenings and weekends too, so make sure you follow our social media pages to find out where we'll be popping up next! You can also email us, inbox us on Facebook and Instagram or leave a message on our answering machine at any time day or night, and we'll get back to you the same or next working day.

We're one big fostering family here at Foster4, so whether you'd like to become a foster carer with Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens, Warrington, or Wirral, we'll look forward to guiding you through your journey to approval and beyond.

It'll be a really interesting (and fairly short!) ride, which will result in a flexible career that really makes a difference to the lives of local children."

Best wishes,

The Foster4 team



About us

Foster4 is an exciting foster carer recruitment service for eight local authorities in Cheshire and Merseyside. Through our dedicated Foster4 Recruitment Hub Fostering Support Workers, we work directly with the local teams, so we really are one, big, fostering family.

By pooling our resources, we're aiming to recruit even more foster carers, provide even greater support to the ones we have, and ultimately keep more local children in their communities with local foster carers that we know well.

We deliver regular Become a Foster Carer Information Sessions for those thinking about fostering, with significant input from foster carers and social care professionals in each of the fostering teams.

We work closely with the fostering teams in the early stages of recruitment and officially 'hand over' to them once you have submitted your Expression of Interest form. They then undertake your assessments and approve and supervise you as foster carers for their respective authority.

But don't worry, we'll still be here too, offering extra support throughout your fostering career.



Who can be a foster carer?

You could!

We're genuinely looking for people from all walks of life. Being great with children is the most important thing. You don't need any specific qualifications or training, we provide all of that.

Many of our carers have a personal or professional background in caring for children. Some carers have been parents to their own children, others haven't had children of their own, but may have been auntie or uncle extraordinaire perhaps!

Others often have a background as teachers, teaching assistants, care workers, police officers or childminders for example. We also have many carers that are fostering after taking redundancy or retiring.

The qualities of a good foster carer...

We asked the young people our foster carers are currently caring for 'What makes a good foster carer?' This is what they said:

- ▶ Be patient
- ▶ Be kind
- Be understanding
- ▶ Have a wicked sense of humour
- ▶ Be good at listening, not just talking
- ▶ Be able to speak up for us to teachers, social workers and others
- ▶ Be warm but level-headed and not too strict or too emotional
- See the importance of us having private time to discuss things through with our social worker
- ▶ Don't bombard us with questions
- ▶ Make us feel like an equal part of the family, not just a visitor
- ▶ Try and see things from our point of view
- ▶ Don't judge our family
- Make us feel like we are loved and wanted
- ▶ Accept that sometimes we won't want to take part in some activities, and give us alternatives
- ▶ Teach us things such as tying our laces, riding a bike and how to cook

We also asked them what they would like the carers own children to be like, if they had any. They said they'd like them to:

- ▶ Share with us
- Be fun
- ▶ Treat us as equals
- ▶ Try and understand the best they can
- ▶ Be respectful of our privacy - it's scary moving in to live with people you don't know

They also told us what they would love a foster carers home to be like:

- ▶ Being allowed to put pictures on the wall of our room
- ▶ Having pictures of us up around the house, just like everyone else in the family
- ▶ A predictable family routine and activities
- Having nice things
- ▶ Lots of quality time together

Please don't give up... ride the storm with us and it'll be worth it in the end!

The Fostering Role

Being a foster carer is about caring for children in your home, whilst problems in theirs are sorted out and/ or alternative future plans for them are made.

The role of a foster carer is a varied one, and your main objective will be to welcome children in to your home, treating them as part of your family and offering them a warm and nurturing environment which keeps them safe, away from neglect, physical or mental abuse, addiction or domestic abuse for example.



Here are a few of the day-to-day tasks:

- ▶ Provide warm, consistent nurturing care. Be the person they can speak to and learn from
- Take them to and from nursery, school, college or work
- ▶ Take them to and from contact or family time. This could be with their parents, grandparents or siblings
- ▶ Encourage healthy lifestyles by making nutritious meals and ensuring they get lots of fresh air and exercise
- ▶ Promote the importance of education, which can be especially important for children in care, as it may be the one consistent thing they have had in their lives. Other children may have missed lots of education, so will need support to catch up. Support them with their homework, attend their parents evenings and liaise closely with their nursery, school or college
- Attend meetings about their development, and give your input into what you think is in their best interests
- ▶ Support them in developing independence skills. For teenagers this may be helping them with things like budgeting, cooking or using the washing machine. For younger children, it may be helping them to learn to do their own buttons or teaching them to ride a bike
- ▶ Support children, when appropriate, to gain a positive understanding of relationships and sexual health
- ▶ Remain non-judgemental about the child's family. You may even see them when dropping children off for contact
- ▶ Support children to have hobbies and take part in social activities
- ▶ Promote positive household routines such as family dinners
- ▶ Provide lots of stimulating household activities and days out and involve children in the decision making processes
- Create a daily log of any activities relating to the care of the child
- ▶ This will become their account of their time with you, that they have access to when they turn 18. It also gives you points of reference should you need to clarify things
- ▶ Encourage healthy habits, such as good hygiene, regular meal times and structured night-time routines
- Keep children safe online, taking advice from their social worker and monitoring things like their phone usage in a way that is developmentally appropriate
- ▶ Include the child as a full and equal part of the household, even if they are only going to be with you for a short time

Types of fostering

By fostering with your Local Authority, you'll benefit from the flexibility with the types of fostering you can offer. Some of our carers undertake all types of fostering, but for some their personal and family circumstances mean they can only offer a specific type of fostering. We'll discuss your circumstances with you as part of your initial enquiry, and our Fostering Support Workers will be able to offer advice on what will work for you and your family.

Short term

Short term fostering is where foster carers care for children for varying lengths of time while court proceedings are finalised and plans are made for the child's future. This could be for a few months, up to around two years.

Permanent

Permanent fostering is when court proceedings have ceased and a child/children will need a permanent foster family until they turn 18 years of age (or sometimes older). Although children are unable to return to live with their family, children and young people will often continue to have contact with members of their family. For example parents, grandparents or siblings perhaps.

Emergency

Emergency foster care is exactly what it says on the tin. An emergency. Children need somewhere safe to stay for a few nights, sometimes up to a few weeks. carers could receive calls during the night or at weekends and information about the child may be limited at first.

Carer to carer short stays/ respite

Some foster carers provide care for a child or young person to support a fellow foster carer or a child's family which helps sustain long term care for a child. This could be on a one-off or regular basis, one weekend per month perhaps.

Short breaks for disabled children

Foster carers will be matched to a child or children to help families who have children with additional needs to have a regular short break from caring. This may be one weekend per month or during the holidays for example and children will not necessarily be children in care.

Parent and Child

Some of our Local Authorities recruit foster carers who can provide a home and support to both a parent and their child, teaching the parent how to care for their baby in the hope they will be able to stay together.

Specialist Foster Care/ Endorsed Foster Carer

Some of our Local Authorities have specialist foster carer schemes, or skill development opportunities to become an endorsed foster carer. These schemes are individual to each Local Authority but there are a few things all applicants must be able to demonstrate such as experience of working with children and adolescents with complex backgrounds, be committed to completing ongoing mandatory and developmental training and demonstrate the skills needed to fulfil the role.



How it works

1 Enquiry and Expression of Interest

You contact us via our website, social media, phone, email or by meeting us face-to-face at an event. We'll take some basic details from you and provide you with an information pack. We'll also let you know of any information sessions that we'll be holding, so you can take advantage of these should you wish. We run them both face to face in your local area and virtually, and on different days and times every month, so there's always one you can attend.

Whatever method you've used to contact us, we'll give you a call to discuss your individual circumstances and see how fostering could work for you. If you're happy to do so, we'll complete an Expression of Interest with you. This gives us a bit more detail about you, your family and what it was that sparked your interest in fostering. But don't worry, if you're not ready to take that next step at this point there's no pressure. We'll keep in contact with you as you wish, and help you on your fostering journey when the time is right for you.

2 Initial Assessment

Once we've received your Expression of Interest form, we'll do some initial checks including social care records and social media checks, then one of our social workers will give you a call to arrange a time for them to come and visit you at your home. They may also bring an experienced foster carer along with them.

After the visit, the social worker will write a short summary for their manager and discuss what was spoken about in the visit with them. They will then contact you to let you know whether or not they are recommending you progress. If they're not recommending that you progress, they will explain why. If they are recommending you progress, they will invite you to apply and arrange for you to attend the Skills to Foster training course.

3 Application

The Local Authority fostering team will send an Application Form out to you, either in the post or via email. You complete this form and return it to the Local Authority you are applying to foster with. If you need any help completing the form, the Foster4 hub team will support you with this.

4 Skills to Foster Training

Skills to Foster is the pre-approval training course that all foster carers in the UK must undertake. We deliver it on a variety of days, at different times and venues across the eight Local Authorities, and the benefit of fostering with Foster4 is that you can attend any of our Skills to Foster courses, so there's always one that will suit your schedule.

It's an exciting, inspiring and very in-depth course which will give you all the basics you need to know about becoming a foster carer. You'll learn all about things such as why children may come into care, the legal process, caring for children safely, record keeping, and how we support you in your role. You'll take part in some informal discussions and activities with other prospective foster carers that will really get you thinking! Don't worry, there are no right or wrong answers, there are no tests and you certainly don't need to remember every single thing. It's all about learning the basics and reflecting on your own understanding of the role.

5 Assessment

You will be allocated an assessing social worker and your formal assessment will begin. It runs in two parts:

Stage 1 is the checks and references. On the Application Form we ask you to provide the details of a number of personal and professional referees (if relevant). We'll contact them for references. We'll speak with your own children if you have any and any significant ex-partners you may have, if appropriate. We also ask you to have a medical with your own GP, who will let us know if they feel you are 'fit to foster', and will inform us of anything that may need to be explored further. We'll also undertake DBS checks.

Stage 2 is the written assessment. We want to know all about you! The assessing social worker will visit you on approximately 7 occasions. They will discuss your views on caring/ parenting, how you were parented yourselves, your life experiences and how they may have helped shaped the person you are today. This all helps us to build a really in-depth picture of you. Again, there are no right or wrong answers, and there's certainly no such thing as the 'perfect' foster carer. Life experience counts for a lot, we need to see that you would be able to put children's needs first, treat each child as an individual and are able to be reflective, learn and develop your skills.

6 Approval

Once your assessment report is completed, you'll be sent a draft for you to add to/ amend any details that may need tweaking etc. You'll then be invited to attend the next Panel. We hold these at least monthly. Your report will be discussed and your assessing social worker will introduce you to the panel members. Panel will then make a decision whether or not to recommend your approval as a foster carer. This decision will be finalised by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) a few days later. You will then be formally notified that you are now an approved foster carer and who your supervising social worker will be.

7 Fostering

Congratulations, welcome to the fostering family!

Your supervising social worker will come out and visit you to do your induction. Here, they will welcome you to the service and give you all the documents you will need to get you started.

You will likely get a telephone call within a few days/ weeks from the social worker on duty, who will discuss a child or children with you. This is known as the referral. The referral contains all the information the fostering team have received about the child, including the reasons they have come into care, what the future plan may be, the contact arrangements that will be in place, where they go to nursery/ school/ college etc, their likes and dislikes, and any other information that will help you to make the decision about whether or not you could provide care for them. In some instances, the social worker may need a decision from you fairly quickly, in others, you may have a bit longer to consider things.

If you decide that you can provide the care for the child, the social worker on duty will make the arrangements for them coming to you. They will discuss the equipment you may need.

You will undoubtedly eagerly await their arrival, and may well be very nervous. Don't worry! All foster carers were new at one time, and even the most experienced still learn with every new child or young person that comes through their front door. You won't get everything right all the time, but your life experiences, training and nurturing instinct will certainly help you to do the best you can to provide safe, consistent care for a child or young person when they need it most.

Whilst children are in your care, both your own supervising social worker and the child's social worker will be in regular contact with you to provide any support and advice you may need. Good luck!



Why us?

There are many, many wonderful reasons to become a registered foster carer with your Local Authority.

Together, we recruit and support more foster carers than any other organisation in our region, by a very long way.

Below are some of the reasons we're so successful:

- ▶ As your Local Authority, our social workers have, in many cases, been working with the child or young person and their families for some time and know them well. This means we have a very good understanding of the child's needs and can pass this knowledge on to you.
- ▶ When the decision is made that they need to be accommodated into our care to keep them safe, we always try to use our own foster carers to look after them. This is because we also know them well too, we know their household and their skills inside and out, and know that they will be able to keep a child living in their own home town, or very close by, which can be hugely important for a child's wellbeing. This can also help to give a child the best possible chances of returning home, or to other family members, where it is in their best interests, when problems are resolved.
- ▶ One of the biggest reasons foster carers want to foster for their Local Authority, rather than an agency, is to become part of the local fostering community. As a Local Authority foster carer, you will have lots of other foster carers living close to you. You will be able to take part in local training and support groups, and you will be caring for children from your local area. This will mean you can often help them to maintain their current educational placement (which is hugely important to many of our children- as it is often the one thing that has been consistent in their lives) and will be taking them to their local schools, nurseries and collages, and local contact with their families.
- ▶ Placing children with our own carers also means that we can keep everything 'in-house', making communication for the child, their foster carer and the services supporting them, such as education, health and the police, as streamlined as possible. This means less disruption and greater efficiency for everyone involved.
- ▶ We, like all Local Authorities in the UK, are working extremely hard to reduce our use of Independent Fostering Agencies, and are having great success in doing so. We're seeing increasing numbers of agency carers transferring to us.

Did you know?

You could transfer to us even if you already have children from another Local Authority placed with you?



The difference between...

Being a Local Authority Foster Carer & an Agency Carer

When we haven't got a suitable carer of our own available, for whatever reason that may be, we first approach our neighbouring Local Authorities to see if they have a foster carer available who would be able to open their home to the child/ children. If we still can't find a Local Authority foster carer, our last option is to approach private organisations, usually Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), to see if they can offer a suitable foster carer to care for our child. Although sometimes we rely on IFAs,

particularly if we have a child who needs to be placed further away from home, it is usually only a short-term measure, and wherever possible and in the child's best interest, we will continue to work to find a carer of our own to provide longer-term care for them.

Our foster carers who have transferred over to us are of course our biggest advocates! Those who have recently transferred tell us they did so for a number of reasons:

Some of the most common reasons include:

Wanting to care for children closer to home

To be honest, I was fed up spending hours in traffic, we were caring for children from miles away. It was no good for the children and no good for us either. Now we're with our LA, we only care for children who go to school within a few miles of our home. It makes life much more enjoyable for everyone- nobody wants to spend half their day on the M62, especially not a 7 year old!

Jackie and Fred, Orford, Warrington

Frequency of placements

Transferring from an agency to the local authority has been such a positive change for us all, we've been able to keep the children local and we're not wondering when we'll get our next placement.

Geri and John, Runcorn

Support

As a single foster carer, I transferred to the LA as I'd heard from a friend, who was also a foster carer, that the support was second-to-none. The coffee mornings and mentoring scheme have been a godsend to me. A few of us now have a WhatsApp group and I know I can contact them for advice or ideas at any time.

Sally, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire West and Chester

Other reasons

I'd been caring for a little boy with complex disabilities for some time, and became aware of the amount of money my LA were paying my agency for his placement. Of course, most of this was profit for the agency, which didn't sit well with me at all. I thought this would be much better spent on other council services. So I contacted my LA and started the ball rolling about transferring. They matched my allowances and I've never looked back. I still care for the same little boy and the transition was only a positive one for us both.

Sylvia, Warrington

Transferring to us

If you're already a foster carer for an independent Fostering Agency or Local Authority, you could transfer to us efficiently. We aim to get transfers done within just 8—12 weeks. We can also often match your current fees or in some circumstances enhance them!

Please get in touch to discuss your individual situation in confidence with us.

How transferring works:

You get in touch and let us know you're thinking about transferring. We come out to see you and discuss your situation – i.e. any current children placed with you, the type of fostering you'd like to do and your current fee structure. You can also let us know your reasons for wanting to transfer. We discuss this with senior management and offer you a transfer package. If you accept and would like to proceed, we ask you to informally let your agency know that you intend to transfer and a protocol meeting is arranged.

We'll allocate you an assessing social worker. They'll contact your agency and go to view your files. They'll come and do your updated assessment, which will be much like your original assessment, but will be more efficient as much of the information, such as your background, will already have been gathered. As you can't be registered with more than one agency/ authority at any time, we have to make sure that you de-register with them on the same day you register with us.

Your assessor will let you know when to give your agency 28 days formal notice of your intention to de-register with them. You'll come to panel who will make a recommendation about you transferring to us. You'll officially be approved as a foster carer for us a few days later when the panel's recommendation is 'rubber stamped' by our Agency Decision Maker.

We're seeing significantly increasing numbers of carers transferring to us from IFAs, so if you're feeling like you're not getting the placements you would like, the support you need, or are travelling too far for training, contact us to see what we can do for you.



W: www.foster4.co.uk
E: enquiry@foster4.co.uk
T: 0345 646 0098

What do we offer?

Fostering schemes and support packages vary slightly in each of our LAs, as they are developed in line with the different recruitment needs in each unique area. However, there is a lot that we all do in the same way:

Before you're approved:

- ▶ Become a Foster Carer Information Sessions run at least once per month in each area.
- A dedicated recruitment team, who can answer any questions you may have.
- ▶ Skills to Foster pre-approval training. Each of our prospective carers undertakes this in-depth course to prepare them for life as a foster carer.
- ▶ A comprehensive programme of mandatory and additional pre-approval training.
- ▶ Your own dedicated assessing social worker.

Once you're approved:

- ▶ An extensive programme of post-approval training
- ▶ 6-weekly support visits from your supervising social worker
- ▶ Regular phone, email and text contact from your supervising social worker
- ▶ More formal supervision visits a few times throughout the year, where you can discuss things like what training courses you'd like to go on for example
- Efficient communication with children's social work teams and senior managers in the LA
- ▶ Strong relationships with partner services such as health, housing and the Police
- ▶ Discount cards
- ▶ Mileage payments
- All the equipment you need to help you care for a child
- ▶ Lots of fantastic competitions and events
- ▶ A supportive local community of fellow foster carers



FAQs

As a potential foster carer, you're likely to have lots of questions. Below are a few of those we get asked most frequently:

▲ How long does the recruitment process take?

We've refined the process significantly over the past few years. We aim to have you assessed and approved as a foster carer within 4-6 months from attending the Skills to Foster course. However, if you'd like to take things more slowly, if you're awaiting redundancy or retirement for example, we can always work to your pace, no problem.

▲ Can we take children on holiday with us?

Absolutely! We want you to treat every child that comes to stay with you as part of the family, no matter how long they're going to be there. So that includes taking children on family holiday and day trips. Our foster carers have taken our children to far-flung places such as Florida and even Australia! And the amount of our carers who have caravans they go to regularly is pretty remarkable.

Sometimes, it may not be appropriate or possible to take a child with you, such as if court proceedings are taking place and children are having a high level of contact for a period. But this is the exception rather than the norm.

▲ Can we get their hair cut or sign for school trips?

As a foster carer, you will get something called delegated authority. Delegated authority is what enables foster carers to make common sense, everyday decisions about the children and young people they care for, such as allowing them to go to friends' houses for sleepovers, signing consent forms for school trips and even arranging haircuts.

This helps to make living with a foster carer as 'normal' as possible for children and young people. If you're ever unsure about what you can or can't do, just ask your supervising social worker.

▲ What about if we want to go out for the evening?

You can use your delegated authority to make decisions about who supports you, as you would as a parent. This means that you can use your support network, such as your parents, siblings or friends, and especially your fellow foster carers to help you with things such as babysitting.

Discuss things with your supervising social worker in the first instance, who will be happy to provide guidance. If it's something regular, such as the child or young person staying at your sister's house once a month for example, we'll usually advise they have a DBS check.



Thank you

Thank you for your interest in becoming a registered foster carer with your Local Authority in Cheshire and Merseyside.

We hope you've found this information useful and above all, inspiring.

We look forward to supporting and guiding you on your journey through the most valuable and rewarding career, fostering!

W www.foster4.co.uk
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Final words from a young person

My foster parents are really sweet and kind. They go out of their way just to see me smile and happy. I remember the first day I arrived at my placement, I was in tears and I couldn't look them in the eye due to how sad I was. Now 5 years have passed and look at me now. We are one family now getting on perfectly well and I don't even feel I'm fostered. My life has changed and I have come out of the dark tunnel of my past life. Now I am thriving and everyone loves me. I am as happy as can be for the world's best foster carers belong to me.



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Visit: www.foster4.co.uk to find out when our next information session is taking place in your area

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