Could YOU foster?

Brighten up a child’s world

Information on Fostering
Our Vision

To inspire ordinary people to make an extraordinary difference
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Children and young people need foster care for many reasons. Some parents have health related problems that prevent them from being able to care adequately for their children. Unfortunately some parents struggle to provide adequately for their children because they did not have a good parenting experience and therefore find it very difficult to be a parent themselves. This can sometimes result in the abuse and neglect of children.

My parents were drinking and fought a lot. When they split up mum couldn’t cope with the four of us. I actually felt relieved when we came into care. Life became so much better.

Kerri, young person who lived in foster care
What do foster carers do?

Foster carers are ordinary people who open up their hearts and homes to provide care to other people’s children. Some children / young people need to live in foster care for a short period of time whilst others need a home for a longer period of time. It is difficult to be specific about timescales as this depends on the family circumstance of the child / young person. Some children cannot return home to live with their parent/s and they move from the foster carer’s home to adoptive families. When children / young people are placed in foster care by social services they are referred to as ‘Looked After Children’ (LAC).

Foster carers are involved in helping children / young people keep in touch with their parents, extended family, friends and local community.

I wouldn’t change living with my foster carer for anything… not even a million pounds! We’ve built up such a bond and that’s something I’ll have forever.

Sheree, young person who lived in foster care

There is an opportunity to learn more about what foster carers do before making a commitment by participating in a pre approval training course known as Skills to Foster.
Types of foster care

Emergency
Foster carers who provide time limited placements at short notice. Emergency carers are needed outside normal office hours ie. after 5.00pm on weekdays, weekends and public holidays.

Respite
Respite foster carers care for children for short periods, usually on a regular basis, to give birth parents or their full time foster carers a break. The length of break can vary from one weekend a month to a two or three week period.

Short term
Foster carers look after children full time in their home but the length of stay can vary depending on the child’s family circumstances. During this time Trust staff will work with the family to try to return the child / young person home.

Longer term
Foster carers provide longer term care for children / young people who are unable to return to live with their parents in the immediate or near future. However that is not to say they will never return to live with them.

There are a range of additional ‘specialist’ schemes within Trusts where financial packages are offered to foster carers. Your own local fostering team will be able to advise you about what is available within your area.
Who can foster?

You may apply to foster:

• Whatever your race, religion, language, culture, gender, disability, age or sexual orientation

• Whether you are married, single, have a partner, are divorced or widowed

• If you already have children of your own - provided your children are happy to accept a foster child into your home

• Whether or not you are in employment. Your employment circumstances will be discussed with you to ensure that you will be able to balance the demands of your employment situation with the demands of fostering

• Whether you are retired - provided you are able to balance your retirement plans with the demands of fostering

• Whether your own childhood was difficult - provided you have been able to reflect on the experience and can now use this in a positive way to help children / young people

• Provided you have space in your home. It is preferable that a child / young person has their own bedroom but if that is not possible they must have their own bed

• Provided you are in good health and enjoy the company of children / young people

• Provided you do not have a police record for violence or sexual offences.
Skills and abilities you need to become a foster carer

Many of the children / young people who need to live with foster carers have been through traumatic experiences. They may feel lonely, afraid or confused which may result in challenging behaviour.

There were times when I was quite rebellious and I’m sure I really pushed it with my foster carers. For a long time when I was growing up I wanted to return to my own birth family. At times that was pretty unsettling for us.

Glenn, young person who lived in foster care

As a foster carer you will need to:

• Promote the health, education and leisure interests of the child / young person
• Listen and communicate with the child / young person in a way that is appropriate for their age and understanding
• Be willing to learn new skills
• Put boundaries in place in order to manage behaviour in an effective and positive way to enable children / young people to grow up to be responsible and well balanced adults
• Have energy and motivation to remain committed to a child / young person through more challenging times
• Have an ability to work with and understand the role of all the professionals involved in the child / young person’s life
• Have good literacy skills or be open to support offered to help you develop these skills
• Attend training courses designed to help foster carers in the important work that they do
• Be available to meet with all the people involved in the child / young person’s life
• Commit to being there for the child / young person even when it feels that you’re getting nothing in return.
Some questions to consider:

- Do you have patience, understanding and a sense of humour?
- Are you warm and nurturing?
- Do you enjoy spending time with children / young people?
- Can you source supports within your own community eg. local youth clubs, child minders, nurseries?
- Are you a good listener?
- Can you be flexible but also capable of setting clear boundaries?
- Would you welcome guidance and support?

My foster carers have put so much effort into fostering. I believe I am a different person as a result of them. They have given me so much encouragement and support with my education and helped me maintain my relationship with my birth family.

Chris, young person who lived in foster care

It is difficult for children coming into a strange house. You have to give them time to get to know you and to settle into your family.

Sharon, foster carer
What help do foster carers receive?

Informal support
The support you receive through your immediate and extended family, your neighbours and your friends is very important. Other forms of informal support may be sought through faith organisations, local clubs, your own GP, or other foster carers living in your area. To foster successfully it is important that you have a strong support network within your community.

Formal support
The main source of support will be the social worker from the fostering team, known as your supervising social worker. The role of the supervising social worker is to supervise and support you when children / young people are in your care. You will have regular contact with them via telephone and visits to your home. When necessary, they will accompany you to meetings or attend meetings on your behalf.

You will also receive support from the child / young person’s social worker, health visitor and other professionals involved. Taking part in training will also be an important source of support throughout your fostering experience.

Outside normal office hours, there is an out of hours service called the Regional Emergency Social Work Service (028 9504 9999). This Service is available between 5.00pm – 9.00am Monday to Thursday, Friday 5.00pm to Monday 9.00am and all day on public holidays. The Service provides advice and support to carers who are concerned about the foster child / young person in their care.

There are two independent agencies in Northern Ireland who provide support to foster carers:
• The Fostering Network www.fostering.net
• British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) www.baaf.org.uk

Allowances
An allowance is paid into your bank account every 28 days which covers the daily cost of caring for a child / young person.
Learning and Development

We provide learning and development opportunities to help foster carers learn about the child / young person’s life experience and develop their skills in fostering. As part of learning and development we provide pre and post approval training. Your training needs will be discussed every year as part of your annual review.

Pre approval training (known as Skills to Foster)

Before you complete your application to become a foster carer you will be invited to attend pre approval training. This will give you the opportunity to explore whether fostering is right for you and your family. You will also get to meet and hear from experienced foster carers.

The pre approval course covers a range of topics such as child development, understanding the impact of early childhood experiences, attachment and bonding, understanding and coping with aspects of child abuse, and ways of saying goodbye to children.

I particularly loved the input from foster carers and the young person. The ‘warts and all’ stories, information, highs and lows and challenges and rewards. It gave a true picture of fostering and I found this inspiring.

An excellent course which was full of information for potential foster carers.

foster carer who attended pre approval training

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foster carer who attended pre approval training
Post approval training

When your assessment is heard at the Trust Fostering Panel who approve you as a foster carer, areas of support and development that the Panel feel you require will be discussed with you and how the Trust will ensure that you receive the support. Training will be provided to assist you in meeting the specific needs of the child / young person in your care.

There is an expectation that you attend and complete the Core Issues in Fostering course within 18 months of approval.

Areas covered in this training:
- Understanding the legal issues
- Contact with birth family and the impact of fostering on your family
- Safer caring guidelines
- Recording and information sharing
- Participation in Looked After Children (LAC) reviews
- Practical and emotional impact of moves in foster care.

Each Trust offers a wide range of post approval training opportunities for carers eg. Recognising Men’s Role in Fostering, Attachment and Loss, and Behaviour Management. Details of all courses can be obtained on our regional training calendar online, in the Trusts’ Learning and Development programmes (also available online), through the supervising social worker or Trust’s Training Coordinator. Carers are provided with a range of venues / times and training methods suitable to their individual needs.

Because of Core Issues training
I feel that I have a better understanding of the child’s physical, psychological and emotional needs and how to support them.
Stephen, foster carer

There are courses to cover almost every need and there is always something new to learn.
Michael & Jane, foster carers
Support groups

Many foster carers meet together in small support groups with, or at times without, the assistance of the fostering social work team. This provides much needed opportunity to talk about fostering issues with other carers. Carer support groups are often attended by carers who have a wealth of experience, knowledge and expertise which they have accumulated through many years in fostering. These carers can offer valuable support to less experienced carers.

Formal and informal feedback from support groups help to inform further training needs which can be addressed through the support group, one to one sessions, or in more structured training settings.
Application and Assessment

Once you express an interest in fostering, your suitability to care for children / young people will be assessed. It is a thorough process which is necessary to ensure the safety and welfare of any child / young person in your care. Many applicants find the assessment experience very helpful in understanding their strengths and skills as carers.

Initial visit
A social worker from the fostering recruitment team will visit you in your home to discuss fostering further and answer any questions you may have.

Training
If you and the social worker both agree to continue your application you will be invited to complete the pre approval course.

Application
Once an application form has been received the social worker from the fostering team will commence the following checks:

Full medical completed by your own GP
The purpose of the medical is to ensure that you are healthy and fit to look after a child / young person and also to ensure that you would not be putting your own health at risk. If you have a medical condition that is reviewed by a consultant we will ask for a report. The cost of the medical is covered by the Trust.

ACCESS NI checks
You and all members of your household aged ten years and over will have an ACCESS NI check completed. An Enhanced Disclosure Certificate will be required (www.nidirect.gov.uk/accessni). Completion of the ACCESS NI application requires forms of identification to be verified by the social worker eg. passport or birth certificate.

References
You will be asked to nominate two or three referees who are not related to you and who have agreed to give you a reference. Your referees will be asked to complete a written reference and will also be interviewed face to face by the social worker completing your assessment. It is important that you speak to your referees to make sure they are willing to do this and that they will speak honestly about you.
Health and Safety checklist
This checklist is completed at this early stage to ensure there are no obvious risks within your home eg. a child in foster care cannot sleep in a bedroom that is an attic conversion for which you did not obtain proper planning permission and building control approval. Any other obvious hazards will be highlighted to you to ensure the safety of the child / young person in your care.

There are some other checks that we will ask for if they apply to you:

• In the event you are not the home owner you will need to inform the owner of the property of your intention to foster. It will also be necessary to reflect this in your home insurance documentation if you become a foster carer

• If you are a parent and have pre school age children we will ask your health visitor for a report

• If you have been in a previous relationship and there are children from that relationship we will wish to speak to your ex partner and your children even if they do not live with you.

If you have had involvement with social services the social worker will explore the circumstances surrounding this and the implications for you in your role as a foster carer. Some additional checks may be made.

Assessment
A social worker from the fostering team will complete a detailed assessment on you and your family. It is important that you talk openly and honestly to the social worker about your life and family during this assessment process, which usually takes four to six months from it begins to presentation at the Fostering Panel. You will have the opportunity to read the assessment to check for factual accuracy. There is a section in the report for you to make comments about how you found the assessment and whether or not you agree with the social worker's assessment of you and your family. During this time you will be able to consider how
fostering will affect you and your family and friends, and reflect on topics raised with you by the social worker.

Throughout the assessment the social worker will also spend some time talking to your children to ensure that they understand how fostering will affect them and also answer any questions they may have. You are free to withdraw from the process at any time. Similarly there may be things arising from your assessment that the social worker feels needs to be discussed with their line manager. Sometimes the social worker and line manager will bring concerns to the Fostering Panel for discussion and advice. You will be kept fully informed throughout the process.

The assessment was quite a lengthy process. The social worker asked about our own childhood and family experiences and involved our birth children . . . asking their opinion and how they felt about things.

Marshall, foster carer

Fostering Panel

The completed assessment is brought to the Trust Fostering Panel for approval. In most instances you will have an opportunity to attend the Panel. The Panel is made up mostly of senior social work staff and an experienced foster carer. The Panel considers your assessment and makes the decision whether to approve you as a Trust foster carer. Your approval as a foster carer is reviewed every year.
Frequently Asked Questions

Can I foster if I am an older person?
Yes there is no upper age limit provided you are in good health.

Can I foster if I do not own my own home?
Yes. You should advise your landlord of your intention to ensure there is no restriction in your tenancy agreement to prevent you from having additional children in your home.

What is the difference between fostering and adoption?
Foster carers do not have parental rights. An Adoption Order transfers the parental rights to the adoptive parents, therefore birth parents lose their parental rights when their child is adopted.

As a family, we have gained more from fostering than we ever thought possible.
Laura & Mark, foster carers

Does fostering affect my benefits?
No.

Is it OK to foster if I own pets?
Most pets are considered to be a valuable addition to a fostering household. However we will need to be satisfied that your pets do not pose a threat to the health and safety of a child / young person in your care.

Do I need to own a car?
A car is an advantage but is not essential.
What now?

Now that you have read the information on fostering, we suggest that you take some time to think seriously about whether fostering is right for you. Discuss it with your family and friends and see if they would support you in an application.

You may find it helpful to visit www.adoptionandfostering.hscni.net to read profiles of some of our existing foster carers and children currently waiting for a foster home. You can also read about young people’s experiences in foster care.

If you wish to proceed with your interest in fostering please contact your local Trust, enquire online or call 0800 0720 137 and a social worker from the fostering recruitment team will contact you.

Thank you for your interest.

I wouldn’t say I’m ready to face the world but I wouldn’t be anywhere near where I am today if it hadn’t been for my foster family.

Jonny, young person who lived in foster care

Foster children may think we enrich their lives but they truly enrich ours.

Sandra & Ivan, foster carers