

# Wirral Fostering Service

## Fostering Policy

IT TAKES A BIG **HEART** TO FOSTER



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## 1. Underlying Principles and Philosophy

The aim of Wirral Fostering Service is to provide a range of high quality foster care placements for children and young people that value, support and encourage them to grow as individuals. Foster Carers will provide good parenting for children who are **Looked After** and children will be consulted and encouraged to actively participate in their care and family life. It is acknowledged that good outcomes for children who are fostered are dependent upon a combination of the quality of the relationship between the child and the Foster Carer, alongside an understanding of the relationship between the child and the birth family.

The Fostering Service is operated and governed in accordance with all relevant legislation, regulations and guidance, and incorporates the requirements and expectations of the following:

- The Children Act 1989;
- Children Act 2004 and 2008;
- Children Act Guidance and Regulations Volume 4;
- Human Rights Act 1998;
- Care Standards Act 2000;
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010;
- Fostering services (England) Regulations 2011;
- Fostering Service National Minimum Standards (2011).

A Statement of Purpose has been prepared in accordance with regulation 3 of the Fostering Regulations and is available for all Foster Carers, service users and professionals.

## 2. Categories of Approval

The different types of carers which are approved by the Fostering Service are:

- Mainstream Foster Carers- short term, long term, respite, parent and child
- Connected Person Foster Carers
- Short Breaks Foster Carers for children with disabilities
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Most Foster Carers receive skills band payments. Placements are financed by making maintenance payments to carers and by paying a fee.

There are 3 levels of skills band payments; these are linked to a skills profile, and fees are paid to carers on levels one, two and three. The skills profile sets out a list of competencies that Foster Carers must be able to demonstrate at each skills band level. It also sets out training and support group attendance requirements at each level.

Each level adds more to the previous level, so that level three carers develop higher level skills and competencies and have a more demanding range of tasks that they must undertake. In return they are paid the highest level of fee.

Connected Person Foster Carers will receive skills band one payments upon completion of the necessary training. Connected Person Foster Carers may progress to other levels, subject to meeting the payment for skills progression criteria. See [Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers Procedure](#).

The following criteria will be used as guidance in considering any application to foster:

## 2.1 Criteria for Accepting Applications from Prospective Foster Carers

Wirral Borough Council promotes diversity and operates an equal opportunities policy; no individual or couple, will be refused consideration as Foster Carers solely on the grounds of marital status, health, age, gender or sexual orientation, race, colour or nationality, religion, financial status or disability.

There is no legal requirement in respect of an applicant's age. However; applicants will need to demonstrate that they can meet the needs of any child placed. It is anticipated that Foster Carers will retire at the national retirement age.

## 2.2 Employment

The Department will seek references from all current employers and from those where an applicant's previous employment involves significant contact with children. Should an applicant decline to consent the matter will be referred to the Fostering Panel for guidance on whether to proceed. The Department will respect applicants desire to keep an application confidential from current employees until approval is recommended and will give an indication of suitability subject to satisfactory employment references being received.

Employment patterns and availability will be taken into account when assessing an applicant's suitability for different types of fostering.

It will be exceptional for an applicant to be approved as both a Foster Carer and a registered childminder. Applicants will not be considered where they are currently accepted by another Agency. However, previous consideration or approval by another agency is not a bar to consideration.

## 2.3 Household Composition

The number and ages of carers own children will be taken into account when assessing suitability.

## 2.4 Health

All applicants will be required to undertake a medical examination. Where there appear to be health or medical concerns regarding suitability, early medicals will be requested, and the advice of the agency medical advisor will be sought. If contentious issues arise, fostering panel may be consulted for their advice on whether to proceed to a full assessment.

Following registration carers are required to undergo a full medical examination every three years; or more frequently if the medical advisor requests more regular oversight.

## 2.5 Lifestyle

The Department will assess applicant's lifestyle with regard to the significance and impact for children who may be placed and offers the following guidance:

- a. **Alcohol Consumption** - Applicants who use alcohol will be expected to keep their consumption within published, safe limits (DoH guidance);
- b. **Drugs** - Applicants will not be approved if using prohibited drugs;
- c. **Smoking** - Only exceptionally will the Department approve applicants who smoke to care for children under the age of five years or children with health problems. This will usually be situations

where the child is already being cared for by a family member. However; all Foster Carers will be encouraged and supported to give up smoking as this is in the best interest of the child. Following advice from the Local Authority Medical Advisors those using e-cigarettes will still be classed as smokers. See [Smoking Policy](#);

- d. **Pets** - No applicant who keeps a dog within the household defined as dangerous in legislation will be approved. Household pets and their care and management will be addressed using the health and safety questionnaire and pet assessment during the Foster Carers assessment. See [Dogs and Pets Policy and Guidance](#).

## **2.6 Criminal Convictions/Records**

[Disclosure and Barring Service](#) (DBS) checks will be undertaken on applicants and all household members aged 18 years and older. They will be updated every three years. Checks will also be sought on regular visitors to the prospective foster home (see [Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers Procedure](#)).

The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 states that a person shall not be regarded as suitable to act as a foster parent if s/he or any member of their household aged 18 or over, has been convicted or cautioned for a specified offence. Applicants convicted or cautioned for other offences can be considered at the discretion of the agency. The advice of the Fostering Panel may be sought during the assessment period. Any appeal against panel advice would be considered by a Senior manager. There is an exception for proposed carers who are relatives and for those who are already caring for the child See [Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers Procedure](#).

In cases where the applicant/s, any member of the household or regular visitor has a recorded caution/conviction/reprimand or warning, then a DBS risk assessment will need to be completed and co-signed by the relevant fostering Head of Service.

## **2.6 Accommodation**

In most situations it is preferable for a foster child to have his/her own bedroom. Wirral Borough Council would ideally like to move towards a single room policy for all foster children in the long term. Exceptionally, foster children may share a bedroom where this is agreed and acceptable to the Foster Carers and the agency and a bedroom sharing risk assessment has been undertaken. See [Room Share Assessment Guidance](#).

The suitability of applicant's accommodation will be considered during an assessment using the guidance on health and safety and the home safety checklist.

## **2.7 New and Ending Relationships**

Foster Carers who become involved in significant new partnerships, will be subject to full reassessment and reconsideration by fostering panel. Foster Carers have a duty to inform their Supervising Social Worker immediately of any planned changes to their household membership.

Where an existing relationship ends, both partners will be subject to reassessment should they wish to continue fostering.

## **3. Assessment and Approval Process**

Also see [Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers Procedure](#).

Applicants wishing to foster will undergo a full assessment regarding their suitability to foster.

Assessments will usually be completed within eight months of receipt of an application form.

Non-confidential sections of the assessment report will be made available to applicants who are expected to co-sign such reports.

The completed assessment report must be quality assured and signed by the Team Manager of the fostering service, before submission to Panel.

A copy of the report should be retained by applicants but must not be shared with any other fostering agency without the consent of Wirral's Fostering Service.

#### **4. Providing a Suitable Physical Environment for a Foster Child**

The Department expects Foster Carers to provide adequate space of a suitable standard for the foster child in their care and to ensure they are transported safely in any vehicle used. This will take into account any new guidance issued by relevant bodies.

#### **5. Employees and Foster Care**

In considering an application by someone who is employed by the Fostering Service or by Wirral Borough council, care must be taken to avoid a conflict of interest. Applications will be considered on an individual basis and in some cases referral to another agency or authority maybe appropriate.

#### **6. Fostering Panels**

Also see [Fostering Panel Procedure](#).

The Department will maintain sufficient fostering panels to meet the needs of the service. Panels will be constituted in line with The Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011 and National Minimum Standards 2011.

Fostering panels will consider:

- Applications for approval;
- The initial review undertaken within the first 12 months of approval;
- Reviews recommending a significant change in registration;
- Reviews following a significant change in circumstances;
- Reviews following **Child Protection** investigations or recommended by complaint investigations, or where there have been three concerns in relation to a Foster Carer household, even where these have not constituted child protection allegations;
- Matching for proposed permanent placements, in regard to connected person carers, including converting existing temporary placements (involving updated assessment reports);
- Reviews where Fostering Standards are not being met;
- Termination of existing carers;
- Notifications of exemptions, resignations and end of placements for monitoring purposes;
- Quality assurance feedback to the Fostering Service in relation of the work presented to fostering panels;

- Whether applications to foster have been completed within required timescales.

Fostering panels will be provided with access to medical expertise and legal advice as required.

The Agency Decision Maker makes a decision taking into account the recommendation of the fostering panel within seven working days of receipt of the recommendations and final set of panel minutes. The ADM's decision will be communicated both verbally and in writing to applicants/carers within seven working days from the panel.

Foster Carers may give notice in writing to the agency at any point that they no longer wish to act as a Foster Carer. Their approval will be terminated with effect, 28 days from the date on which the notice is received by the Fostering Service.

New applicants and approved Foster Carers have the opportunity to attend fostering panels for approval, reviews and other matters considered appropriate. Prospective Foster Carers and approved Foster Carers will have the opportunity to make further representations to the fostering panel or have their case heard by the Independent Review Mechanism in situations where they do not agree with the Agency Decision Maker's determination following the recommendation by the fostering panel.

## **7. Number of Children in Foster Homes**

The Children Act 1989, Schedule 7, states that a person may not foster more than **three** children ("the usual fostering limit") unless either:

- The children concerned are all siblings; or
- The Local Authority grants exemption based on relevant grounds.
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Also see: [Exemptions and Extensions/Variations to Foster Carer Approval Procedure](#)

When a young person reaches 18 years, for the purpose of payment, that young person will continue to be considered the first placement. However for the purposes of fostering regulations, that young person will not count as a placement, but as an adult member of the household. Should approval for further foster placements be subsequently sought, the usual review/reassessment process will be applied.

## **8. Out of Hours (EDT)**

Also see [Emergency Duty Team Service & Out of Hours Support to Foster Carers](#).

A list of available placements will be provided to EDT by the fostering duty service on a daily basis.

Support for Foster Carers out of office hours will be available via EDT on 0151 677 6557.

## **9. The Foster Carer Agreement**

Also see [Foster Care Agreement](#).

On approval, the Department will enter into a written agreement with the Foster Carer.

Foster Carer Terms and Conditions, and the signed Foster Care Agreement, form the basis of the on-going agreement, between Wirral Borough Council and its Foster Carers.

The ages, gender, numbers and categories of approval, and the skills band level of the carer, are stated on the Foster Care Agreement.

## **10. Reviews of Foster Carers**

Also see [Review and Termination of Approval of Foster Carers Procedure](#).

Foster Carers will be reviewed within one year of their initial approval and the first review must be presented to the fostering panel.

Where new information comes to light, where there is a significant incident, change of circumstances, or where Fostering Standards are not being met, a review may be called and the review papers will be presented to the fostering panel.

Reviews will otherwise be held annually, undertaken jointly with carers and either referred to fostering panel or approved in accordance with procedures. There is a commitment to Foster Carers being independently reviewed by the Independent Reviewing Team in due course.

Written contributions will be requested from fostered children aged eight years and over, and from Social Workers responsible for children who have been placed in the foster home since the last review, these will also be sought in regards to those children who have moved in the previous 12 months.

Review decisions will be communicated in writing to Foster Carers who will receive a copy of the Reviewing Officer's report.

Foster Carer Agreements must be kept up to date with current approval details.

## **11. Training**

The Department will produce an annual training strategy for all approved Foster Carers, which is in line with Induction Standards for the Children's Workforce requirements and includes mandatory training opportunities. Carer training needs will also be identified via Foster Carer annual reviews and their Personal Development Plan.

All applicants are required to attend group preparation sessions offered by the Department (currently 'Skills to Foster'). Exceptions to this may include applicants who are able to demonstrate they have completed a similar programme with another agency within the preceding two years. Connected Person Foster Carers will be provided with shorter and more specific preparation training more suited to their role.

Where applicants are to be jointly approved as Foster Carers, both are required to attend pre approval training and it is expected that both Foster Carers will attend post approval training, other family members, including young people where appropriate may access pre and post approval training. Foster Carers Personal Development Plan's will be reviewed alongside the Supervising Social Worker.

The training strategy will pay attention to organising training courses to encourage and facilitate attendance and will include the payment of travel in excess of the weekly mileage allowance, and payment of childcare expenses. See [Prospective Foster Carers Report: Initial Personal Development Plan \(PDP\) Procedure](#).

Personal Development Plans will detail the applicant's anticipated future training needs and identify mandatory post approval training requirements. Completion of mandatory training will be monitored through the annual review process.

## **12. Supervision, Advice and Support**

Each approved Foster Carer will be allocated a Supervising Social Worker who will ensure that the carer is informed of and complies with all relevant standards, policies and guidance agreed by the Department. The Supervising Social Worker will provide supervision, advice and support in relation to the fostering task and carer development.

The child's Social Worker has prime responsibility for the child and will provide advice and guidance to the Foster Carer in respect of the specific placement.

A minimum of four supervisory visits (one of which may be the Fostering Review visit) should be arranged to ensure that in any 12 month period all household members are seen by the Supervising Social Worker. The Supervising Social Worker will check at each supervisory visit, to ensure that foster carers have fully completed placement agreements, for all children/young people in placement.

Supervising Social Worker will undertake one unannounced supervisory visit each year, the pro-forma should indicate and record the unannounced nature of the visit.

It is a requirement of the Wirral Skills Band Criteria, that all approved band 2 and 3 carers attend regular support groups.

## **13. Holidays during Term Time**

Wirral Borough Council, Children and Young Person's Department, does not support foster children being taken out of school to go on holiday during school term time. If there are exceptional circumstances the Head of Service for the child may use their discretion to approve this.

## **14. Discipline**

The Department has a policy of no physical chastisement of Children **Looked After** / young people and Foster Carers must agree not to use corporal punishment or any measure of control, restraint, or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable. See **Behaviour Management and Safe Caring Policy**.

Foster Carers will be mindful of the child's pre-case history and looked after experiences and make appropriate and informed decisions regarding their approach to discipline and behaviour management.

It is acknowledged that on occasions a foster child's behaviour may become out of control or an incident occurs which may require the carer or child to receive treatment. In such instances, Foster Carers must as soon as possible after the event, inform the Supervising Social Worker and the child's Social Worker. All incident/accidents must be recorded by the carers and in the event of an occurrence out of hours, the Emergency Duty Team must also be informed.

Applicants who support physical chastisement of their own children will not be assessed as Foster Carers for the Department.

## 15. Recording

CCTV must not be used as a way of supervising children within the foster home. It may be used as a deterrent against criminal activity outside the home if a carer wishes.

Carers are expected to maintain a written record of each child's placement, recording significant events as well as the child's progress. See [Recording Guidance for Foster Carers](#).

Records should be made available to the social worker and supervising Social Worker, and foster carers should be advised that they may be used as part of court proceedings and assessments.

Carers are required to record matters relating to the child's health and development.

## 16. Contact

This Department recognises and positively promotes the importance of contact between a child and his / her family and friends.

Foster Carers have a responsibility to promote and facilitate contact where this is part of the child's care plan.

Arrangements for contact should take place in the Foster Carer's home, if this is considered to be in the best interests of the child and is discussed and agreed by all parties.

The Department will reimburse expenses incurred in either arranging or carrying out contact. Transport costs can only be claimed when the weekly mileage element of the maintenance allowance has already been exceeded.

## 17. Safeguarding

Foster Carers have responsibility to safeguard any child in their care.

Foster Carers are required to inform the agency immediately, if new adult members join the household or become regular visitors. [Disclosure and Barring Service](#) (DBS) checks will be undertaken and assessments/approvals updated as required.

All carers will have a Safe Caring Policy which is regularly reviewed and updated.

Safe caring skills and guidance on safe caring will be addressed both through the assessment process, in group preparation sessions and in written guidance.

The training strategy will provide for on-going training of approved carers on safe caring practices.

The Department has a procedure for investigating any allegation of abuse within a foster home and written information and guidance on this procedure will be provided for all carers.

If a Foster Carer has concerns about any previous placements a child has experienced, s/he must inform the child's Social Worker immediately.

The investigations of allegations of abuse within Foster Care will be recorded and monitored by the Department. See [Allegations Against Foster Carers Procedure](#).

Fostering Team Managers will keep a separate record of all allegations of abuse involving Foster Carers and strategy meetings.

Supervising Social Workers must investigate and accurately record, all allegations and concerns on the Foster Carer file.

The investigation of any allegation of abuse will be referred back to Fostering Panel for consideration if these are founded or unsubstantiated. Three issues of concern will trigger a Foster Carer review, which will also be referred to Panel.

Carers will have access to an independent support person through this process via an independent support service.

Following an investigation into safeguarding issues and where children are deemed to continue to be at risk, consideration must be given to removing Foster Carers from the register.

### **18. Foster Care Adoption**

The fostering task is fundamentally different to that of adoption. Any Foster Carer wishing to be considered as an adopter of a fostered child in their care, must inform the child's Social Worker verbally and in writing, and also inform the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) as part of the child care review process.

If the request is considered appropriate, this will necessitate an assessment of the Foster Carer/s suitability as adoptive parent/s. The assessment report will normally be completed by a member of the Adoption Team, and presented to Adoption Panel for approval.

Foster Carers who are not supported by the Department, may wish to seek independent legal advice.

See also [Foster Carer Adoption Procedure](#).

### **19. Special Guardianship**

Special Guardianship is a legal alternative to adoption that Foster Carers may wish to consider. Information is available from the child's Social Worker, Supervising Social Worker, or their team managers.

Special Guardianship Procedures are available within Children's Social Care and a Specialist Worker is available to offer guidance and advice to Foster Carers.

### **20. Placement Moves and Disruption**

Also see [Placement Planning and Disruption Meetings Procedure](#).

Children and young people should not move to another placement unless it is clearly in the child's best interest; the decision has taken into account the child's wishes and feelings and the move is properly planned. Moves may also be agreed following a statutory review. All proposed moves must be discussed

with the child's [Independent Reviewing Officer](#). The disruption of a planned and permanent placement would normally trigger a placement stability meeting to explore the issues and assist planning.

The meeting may make recommendations to the next review of the Foster Carer, both on the carer's suitability to remain registered and the detail of their registration.

There is no assumption that if a placement breaks down it is the child or Foster Carers fault. Placement disruptions are usually the consequence of a number of inter-connecting factors rather than any one cause.

## **21. Information to Foster Carers**

Foster Carer Terms and Conditions, and the signed Foster Carer Agreement, form the basis of the on-going agreement, between Wirral Borough Council and its Foster Carers.

In addition, approved Foster Carers will also be provided with written information on the Department's policies, procedures, practices and guidelines which relate to foster care.

This information will be updated periodically.

Foster Carers will be provided with child specific information necessary for them to safely and appropriately care for children placed with them. This will be recorded in the placement plan and include information on the child's health, education, ethnic, cultural and religious identity, and details of any abuse the child is known to have experienced. The placement plan must be fully completed and provided by the child's Social Worker at the outset of the placement.

Children's information is strictly confidential and must not be disclosed by the foster carer. It should be retained in a safe place and returned to the Social Worker when the child leaves the placement.

## **22. Access to Records**

Also see [Access to Records Procedure](#).

Wirral Borough Council complies with the Data Protection Act and the GDPR legislation. With the exception of confidential or third party information, Foster Carers can examine their record on request.

## **23. Payment of Allowances/Fees**

The Department will pay Foster Carers a weekly allowance for each child placed in their care, the level of allowance is based on the child's age.

Fees are payable to Foster Carers according to their skills band approval level. Allowance and Fee levels are reviewed annually.

Details of allowances and other financial support will be provided in accordance with Fostering Standards terms and conditions, and the requirements of staff instruction.

Details of the payments made, will be provided for carers specifying the child for whom the payment is made and the purpose of the payment. An annual summary is also provided to Foster Carers at the start of each financial year.

Carers will be expected to be able to demonstrate on request that allowances paid have been used for the intended purpose. Receipts for clothing and any large items bought for the child should be kept and submitted to the Social Worker if required.

Overpayment of fostering allowances must be notified immediately to Foster Carer Payments in order to prevent large overpayments occurring.

Payment of the fostering fee will be payable in cases where any Foster Carer is suspended pending possible de-registration. Payment of fees will continue if a child is withdrawn from placement because of an allegation until the matter is fully resolved or a decision is made by the Agency Decision Maker of the fostering panel to terminate the carer's registration.

When a young person reaches 18 years, for the purpose of payment, that young person will continue to be considered the first placement. However for the purposes of fostering regulations, that young person will not count as a placement, but as an adult member of the household.

#### **24. Children's Property**

Carers are expected to ensure that children's property and possessions are securely kept, respected, valued, and accompany the child in an appropriate holdall or suitcase when they leave the placement. The importance of photographs and personal possessions given by their birth family will be acknowledged and respected by Foster Carers.

#### **25. Equipment**

The Department will make arrangements to provide essential and safety equipment necessary to meet the needs of each child in placement.

All equipment and furniture remains the property of the Department. Should the equipment be damaged by the foster child it will be replaced by the Department.

#### **26. Overnight Stays and Contact with Family and Friends**

Also see [Social Visits \(Including Overnight Stays\) Procedure](#)

Decisions on overnight stays should in most circumstances be delegated to Foster Carers and will be written into the child's placement plan. Children Looked After should as far as possible be granted the same permissions to take part in normal and acceptable age appropriate peer activities as would be reasonably granted by the parents and peers.

#### **27. Complaints and Representations**

It is the policy of the Department to attempt to resolve any Foster Carer complaint or representation promptly, at a local level and to mutual satisfaction. See [Complaints Procedure](#). Any outcomes from complaints investigations will be reviewed at six monthly intervals by the management team in order to improve services where necessary.

## **28. Deregistration**

Where Foster Carers are no longer approved as Foster Carers, they will be de-registered by bringing the case to the Fostering Panel. The reasons for the de-registration will be recorded, including situations where they have been removed from the register of Foster Carers in the interest of the safety or welfare of children.

## **29. Education**

The Department and its Foster Carers actively promote the education and achievement of all children who are looked after. Education is seen as valuable in itself and is part of preparation for adulthood. It is expected that Foster Carers will advocate and support children to achieve their educational potential. As the people who know foster children best on a day to day basis, Foster Carers have a key role to play in discussions about education issues.

## **30. Transition into Independence**

Also see [Leaving Care Procedure](#).

The Department promotes opportunities for young people to 'stay put' in their foster home wherever possible beyond the age of 18 years. This can offer a transition to independence closer to that experienced by most other young people. Foster Carers will be informed how this will be supported and financed.