

# FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT: NATIONAL SUPPORT SERVICE

Project number: 8412

## OVERVIEW OF THE AUTHORITY

1. The Department for Education (DfE), is responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills in England. We work to provide children's services, education and skills training that ensures opportunity is equal for all, no matter background, family circumstances, or need. At our heart, we are the department for realising potential. We enable children and learners to thrive, by protecting the vulnerable and ensuring the delivery of excellent standards of education, training and care. This helps realise everyone's potential – and that powers our economy, strengthens society, and increases fairness.

## POLICY BACKGROUND

2. DfE is looking for an organisation to develop, co-ordinate and manage a 'National Support Service' for Local Authority (LA) fostering service providers, which will offer in-depth diagnostic support specifically focused on their recruitment and approval practices, with the aim of providing bespoke recommendations for improvement, alongside building a strong evidence base on which to share good practice nationally.
3. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care and Competition and Markets Authority review into Children's Social Care have called for urgent action to recruit more foster carers. The Government made fostering a day one commitment in their response to these reviews. There is a long-standing placement sufficiency problem in foster care, which is likely to worsen due to increasing concerns over the rising cost of living, with strong evidence this is negatively impacting on retention<sup>1</sup>. The implications for this to children's outcomes, as well as local authority finances, demand action. In her oral statement, responding to the Independent Review, Secretary of State Keegan stated that we will 'reform the care system to make sure we have the right homes for children in the right places'.
4. In the Government's response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, and CMA markets study, *Stable Homes, Build on Love*, DfE have pledged to put love, relationships, and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care. When care is the best choice for a child, it is critical that the care system provides stable, loving homes close to children's communities. However, this is increasingly challenging as fostering service providers find it hard to recruit new foster carers. With an aging foster care population, and a decreasing number of new foster carers recruited each

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<sup>1</sup> [A survey conducted by FosterTalk](#) of 4,349 foster carers reports that 43% of carers are considering ceasing to foster in the next 2 years without further financial support. In a survey conducted by The Fostering Network, 70 per cent of respondents said they have considered quitting due to the rising costs and not being able to afford to look after children in their care anymore.

year, means too often children are living far from where they would call home or in the wrong type of home for what they need. We need urgent action to support fostering service providers to improve their recruitment and approval processes, to minimise the 'drop off' rates between initial enquiry and approval. This will support our mission to ensure that children are in the right homes in the right places.

5. We know that for children who can no longer live with their family, foster care provides the next best alternative. However, there are not enough foster carers and this can lead to issues such as residential care and placement breakdown. 2022 Ofsted research on why children go into children's homes found 41% of children were placed in residential care following a breakdown of their fostering placement. Whilst it is not possible to say from this study whether early intervention with a foster carer might have prevented the breakdown research by the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care found that a recent increase in the demand for children's residential care was attributed to a lack of fostering capacity and that children who were eligible or better suited for fostering ended up in residential care because of insufficient fostering capacity (WWCSC, 2022). Ofsted 2022 data shows that residential care was part of the intended care plan for just over half of the children surveyed.
6. There is evidence that the shortage of suitable foster carers leads to worse experiences for children in care.<sup>2</sup> Shortages of foster carers also impact on local authority budgets and, at worst, see children who could thrive in foster care placed in more expensive residential provision. We estimate the annual difference in cost per child in local authority or private of voluntary residential care and the equivalent place in foster care to be £204,000 a year<sup>3</sup>.
7. Data of foster care recruitment shows key weak points in the process. In the year ending March 2022, there were 138,075 initial enquiries from prospective fostering households, an all-time high. However, only 8,280 foster carer applications were received. Whilst this data should be treated with caution due to likely duplication in numbers caused by individuals enquiring with more than one service, there are clear drop off points with 94% of enquiries not resulting in an application. Even fewer go on to be approved, with 4,035 new fostering households approved in the year ending March 2022.<sup>4</sup> By increasing the number of foster carers available, LAs would be able to ensure that there are sufficient foster care placements for children whom foster care is recommended on their care plan
8. To start changing the way we provide stable, loving homes for children in care, over the next two years the government has pledged to deliver a

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<sup>2</sup> The [CMA](#) have highlighted that there is a shortage of appropriate places for local authorities seeking to place CYP, which can negatively impact on children's wellbeing by being placed far from home; in placements that do not meet their needs; or separates them from siblings.

<sup>3</sup> This figure is based on the annualised unit cost differential between our preferred estimates for the weekly costs of fostering (£722/week) and residential care (£4,644/week). These figures are in turn derived from [Narey & Owers \(2018\)](#) and the [PSSRU Unit Costs of Health and Social Care Report \(2021\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

fostering recruitment and retention programme so foster care is available for more children who need it, investing over £27 million over the next two years. This end-to-end improvement programme will boost approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage, as well as addressing retention through better support to existing foster carers and will be made available to approximately 50% of all local authorities in this initial phase.

9. In order to provide much needed support to the remaining 50% of LAs not involved in the fostering recruitment and retention programme, we are proposing to offer this 'National Support Service'.
10. This work will operate in parallel with roll out of the wider foster carer recruitment and retention programme. More information about this work can be found here: Fostering Recruitment and Retention programme - GOV-UK Find a grant ([find-government-grants.service.gov.uk](https://find-government-grants.service.gov.uk)). This procurement is seeking an organisation to provide individual, bespoke support to LAs who are not part of the above programme to help them identify improvements they can make to their foster carer recruitment and approval practices and facilitate networking and the sharing of good practice between LAs.

## **REQUIREMENTS**

### **Knowledge and skills**

11. The successful supplier will be able to demonstrate that their organisation/consortium possesses the following requisite skills and expertise:
  - i. A demonstrable record of working in a Children's Social Care context with experience specifically in foster care recruitment;
  - ii. An understanding of how to maximise data collection and tracking systems for prospective foster carers to enable system improvement recommendations for recruitment and approval practices;
  - iii. A demonstrable knowledge of best practice within foster care recruitment, including marketing approaches, and a knowledge of best-practice approaches to the approval process;
  - iv. Experience of working with LAs, including credibility within the sector to influence delivery at a senior level.

### **Description and deliverables of activities**

12. The following is a suggested list of activities which we will seek to refine following market engagement sessions:

### **Requirement 1: Diagnostics**

13. *Description:* in-depth sessions with individual LAs to consider their current foster carer recruitment and approval practices, policies, processes and

figures, data and digital tracking of initial enquiries through to application, as well as considering their approach to marketing, the support and training available and the support needs of their foster carers producing a set of findings highlighting strengths, areas for improvement and clear recommendations.

**14. Deliverables:**

- contact and arrange in depth sessions with the LAs with guidance from DfE. Target numbers will be specified.
- work intensively with interested local authority foster recruitment teams individually for 5 working days to look at their end-to-end foster carer recruitment and approval practices, policies, processes and figures as well as their CLA population and sufficiency data.
- engage or facilitate engagement with existing and prospective foster carers in the LA to inform their recommendations.
- at the end of this period the organisation will produce a clear set of bespoke findings highlighting strengths, areas for improvement with a clear, bespoke development plan and set of recommendations for the short and medium term based on the need in the local authority.

**Requirement 2: Event organisation and capturing and sharing good practice.**

**15. Description:** Capture and share best practice of successful foster carer recruitment and approval processes. Organise and deliver regional workshops and national events to facilitate and encourage networking, peer-to-peer support and to share good practice amongst all LAs.

**16. Deliverables:**

- arrange and run quarterly/ 6 monthly networking regional/ sub-regional workshop sessions across the county, with groups of LAs focusing on specific themes or challenge to enable shared learning, peer-to-peer troubleshooting and the strengthening of regional relationships and networking.
- Identify the areas where LAs most commonly need support emerging from requirement 1 and structure the workshops around these themes bringing in expert advice from the sector as required.
- arrange and run two national events available to all LAs to showcase best practice and celebrate success, sharing and showcasing innovative approaches to foster carer recruitment from the sector and LAs.
- capture, share and disseminate approaches, strategies, and innovative ways of working which have proved successful for other LAs.

## Service delivery KPIs:

17. Key performance indicators will be linked to overall programme goals. This will be set by the time of contract award but will be linked to the key deliverables set out above.

## Milestones

18. Key milestones for the programme are set out in the table below:

Milestone	Approximate date
Contract tender launched	September 2023 – October 2023 (4 week tender period)
Contract awarded	December 2023
Delivery commences	January 2024

## Contract value

19. The maximum value for the contract for financial year 2023 – 2024 is £500,000 and £200,000 for financial year 2024 -2025. This maximum amount is inclusive of VAT.

## Costings

20. We anticipate that a support package is made available to all LAs who are not involved in the fostering recruitment and retention programme. We will identify LAs to the supplier and LAs will be invited to accept this fully-funded programme of diagnostic support. In the event that all LAs are welcoming of this support, LAs to receive support will be identified based on need, considering the number of CLA within the LA and their current rate of foster carer enquiries and approvals. LAs with the largest number of CLA and the lowest rates of foster carer approval will be prioritised for support. There is scope within the budget to deliver this to a significant number of LAs, depending on interest.
21. There is also scope for the successful supplier to develop training resources, aimed at LA fostering services, which target specific areas of need, such as marketing, data collection and call handling.