

CHOOSING A FOSTERING SERVICE

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People who are interested in becoming foster carers often seek advice about which fostering service to approach or choose, and this is very evident on social media. This short document offers some tips to potential foster carers who are exploring this matter.

1. Decide whether you have an ideological preference that might impact on the type of fostering service you are willing to consider. Some people feel that they want to foster for a local authority, and others have a preference for a charity or not-for-profit agency. Others will want to foster for whatever service that they think offers the best support, independent of these matters.

2. Think about the sort of fostering that you probably want to undertake, as this might also impact on the sort of service that will suit you best. For example, if you are keen to foster babies and infants, you will want to ensure that any service you agree to foster with, are getting sufficient referrals for this age group. If you are looking to foster teenagers, then this will be less relevant, and you might want to prioritise the fostering services who offer the best support. If you are interested in some sort of specialist fostering, like parent and child fostering, it is worth thinking about whether there is an agency near you that has a specialist scheme or particular expertise in that area.

3. Having decided what type of fostering service might be best, you will then need to find out which fostering services are operating in your geographical area. You can consider fostering for neighbouring local authorities, as well as your own, and independent agencies often cover quite wide geographical areas. It is worth finding out where a service has its offices, and what that might mean in terms of attending training, support groups, and the like.

4. Having identified some potential fostering services, it is important to get some basic information about them. The easiest way to do that is to look at their website, which should include a link to their Statement of Purpose. If you are looking at an independent fostering service, you should also look at their most recent Ofsted inspection report, alongside the other information you gather about them.

5. Deciding to foster is a really important decision, and so it makes sense to meet with more than one service to get a sense of which might suit you best. Any service that you approach will want to meet with you and decide whether they think you might be suitable, but always remember that this is a two-way process. Foster carers are a valuable resource, so be confident in finding out what each of the services can offer you.

6. There are some specific things you might want to ask: How will you be supported? Does the service offer regular breaks for their carers? What support do they provide to birth children and other family members? How will you be supported if things are difficult and you feel that you are struggling?

It is worth asking about the average case-load of each supervising social worker. In other words, how many foster carers does each full-time social worker supervise? If case-loads are low, then – all else being equal – the worker will have more time to provide better support to each foster carer.

How is training delivered and what is expected? Is it all on-line without a live trainer, or does the service invest in bringing in external trainers for in-person events? How you view the answers to this will depend on what suits you best, and what you are looking for. Remember, many children in foster carer will have experienced trauma, and good quality training will help you to best meet their needs.

Does the foster service have a local foster carer association (or equivalent) with arrangements for that group to meet periodically with the fostering service management? If not, that would raise questions on whether foster carers are being listened to within that fostering service, and to what extent their views are valued.

What is their offer to the children they look after? This should be set out in the services Children's Guides, which are written in a way that provides information directly to children and young people of different ages.

It will also be important to think about money, and while this should not be your primary driver, fostering is a demanding role, and you will need to be financially stable. Ask to see the services finances policy, as this will cover all elements including any additional allowances for holidays, birthdays and the like.

7. It is always good to get the views of foster carers from a particular service - and there is a lot of that available on the internet and in social media - but you do need to be cautious. Some fostering services will offer financial rewards to carers who recruit others, and other carers might have individual reasons to be positive about their service, that might not apply equally to you. So, listen to the experiences of existing foster carers, but do that with care.

8. Similarly, it is important to be cautious when fostering services offer you a very quick and easy assessment or 'transfer' process. While most applicants to foster are keen to get on with things without delay, there can be good reasons for taking appropriate time in assessing suitability, and preparing you for a challenging task. Depending on your background and experience, it may be appropriate to aim for a swifter than usual assessment. However, you might want to be cautious about any service that does not practice safe and robust recruitment, as this might reflect their approach in other areas.

9. When evaluating what a fostering service is telling you, it is good to be curious, and to dig deeper behind the basic information given. A service which appreciates being asked to evidence that it does what it claims, is likely to work in an open and transparent way with its carers. Fostering is not easy, and so you need to be confident that you will get the good quality support that is being promised, especially when things are difficult.



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