

Good Practice Guide to Recruitment



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AFA Cymru
National Fostering Framework



National
Fostering
Framework
Fframwaith
Maethu
Cenedlaethol



AFA CYMRU
association for fostering and adoption
cymdeithas ar gyfer maethu a mabwysiadu

Recruitment of Foster Carers

A guide to good practice for Local Authority Fostering Teams

This guide is intended to provide an outline approach to the behaviours, mindset and actions that will enable us all to create a consistent, effective, and positive customer experience for Local Authority foster carers, from their first step and throughout their journey with us.

The practice recommendations included in this guide are based on detailed analysis of performance data across all Local Authorities in Wales; feedback collated from applicants to foster and those recently approved; and exploration into the leadership, structure, systems and process of some of the best recruiting services across the UK.

This guide has been produced by the National Fostering Framework in partnership with AFA Cymru. It is endorsed by the key stakeholders who govern and lead on the work of the National Fostering Framework on behalf of Welsh Government.

The contents of this document should be considered as guidance. This guidance has been produced at the request of staff and services across Wales. It is important to acknowledge that the recruitment and retention of foster carers is an area of continuous development. We will continue to strive to learn from each other, and the people which we serve, to continually enhance our services and deliver improved outcomes. As with all aspects of local government service delivery, service models and structures are for services themselves to determine, according to local resources and demands.

“I remember feeling like I was making one of the biggest decisions of my life and I had no idea if it was the right thing to do.... Within a few minutes of my first call to the fostering team, I felt reassured, in safe hands and I was certain that the fostering journey was for me. I’ll never forget that first phone call.”

Consultation – Key Messages

The journey to becoming Foster Wales has been a whole team approach from the very beginning. We have only been able to reach this point because of the valuable insight of each and every stakeholder who took the time to share their experiences, views, perspective and ideas.

The greatest insight of all came from those at the heart of our services, the people who are living the fostering journey - applicants, foster carers, children and young people.

For those who offered first-hand experience, they shared rich information, which forms the foundation of the good practice recommendations within this guide.

Individual staff, working in a variety of capacities told us about what was working well, what they were worried about and the things that they would like to do differently.

Some services went the extra mile, they shared in great detail how they had transformed their service and produced excellent outcomes in the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Whatever your role is, or has been, on our journey to becoming Foster Wales, we are thankful for your support, insight and commitment.

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WHY we are doing this: the challenge we face, together

Local Authority Fostering is facing a recruitment challenge; put simply, there are more children in need of foster placements than there are approved foster carers.

It is estimated that across Wales we need to recruit 550 new foster carer families every year to keep up with the increase in numbers of children who need that care and support, whilst also replacing foster carers who retire or don't take on a new placement. Recruiting more high-quality foster carers into Local Authority fostering will help us create the best possible matches between families and children through increased choice and flexibility.

All of this is set against a hugely competitive marketplace, which is populated by a number of effective commercial organisations who have dedicated, trained marketing expertise in recruiting new foster carers. The Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) are able to focus effort and expertise in finding new foster carers who are then made available to Local Authority fostering teams at a considerable cost.

The big step forwards we have taken to face that challenge

Local Authority Fostering Teams across Wales have decided to take action, to significantly increase the number and range of foster carers recruited directly to Local Authorities and reduce our reliance on the commercial sector.

This requires Local Authority fostering and recruitment teams across Wales to think bigger, to combine our efforts and expertise to create a significant national impact on awareness that fostering is an option, and that fostering with your Local Authority is the best option.

We have created a single, consistent brand for Local Authority fostering across Wales that will enable us to build familiarity and authority, to become a natural first step. We will support that with an ongoing national advertising and marketing campaign to raise awareness that fostering is a great thing to do, that almost anyone can do it, and that the best way to do it is with your Local Authority fostering team.

By working together, we will make a national impact across Wales by emphasising the advantages of our dedicated local expertise and community roles. To help create this national impact we have rebranded Local Authority Fostering as Foster Wales.

We are Foster Wales

Foster Wales clearly communicates that we are a fostering services provider, operating across Wales with a national purpose. It offers the scale and sense of authority that we want to create.

It also easily extends and adapts to create a local name for each Local Authority fostering team across Wales, whilst keeping them connected to the national picture.

Why do we do what we do?

The success of Foster Wales is built on us all living and breathing our collective purpose:

“Working Together to Build Better Futures for Local Children”

That is what we are here to do; it is our sole focus, it speaks directly to the altruistic nature of foster carers and it sets us apart from the commercial sector, who naturally have additional priorities and goals.

We are a collaborative of fostering experts, within our own Local Authority, with the other fostering teams in our region, and with every dedicated fostering expert in Wales. We work together.

But we also work closely with our foster carers. We are all part of one team, and we provide all the support and development opportunities needed to create positive outcomes for the children in our collective care.

The importance of customer focus

For this to work, for us to be able to achieve our goals and significantly increase the numbers of foster carers that we recruit and retain in our Local Authority, we must adopt a consistently high standard of customer focus.

It is critical to remember that first impressions count. It is a huge step for anyone to pick up the phone, or send an email, to ask about starting the journey to becoming a foster carer. It is a moment of truth, and it is vital that we make the first impression a positive one. That they feel they are in the hands of a positive, passionate, flexible, dedicated expert.

This is what we are competing against - a commercial sector that is tested, trained, and fine-tuned in their efforts to make the most of every lead. This is achieved by:

Making it easy for potential carers to make contact.

Being flexible in the options provided for that first contact 'moment of truth'.

Responding quickly to that potential foster carer making that first, tentative step to reach out.

Being tenacious in capturing that moment of truth and turning it into a fostering journey.

Using language that is positive, upbeat, helpful. "Yes, you can. Yes, we will".

We have to do just as well, if not better, in order to make the most of every lead that our national campaign and our local activities create for us.

Creating a new lead takes time, effort, resource.

We cannot afford to lose a single lead, to waste a single opportunity.

We cannot afford to be anything other than customer focused.

HOW do we become more customer focused?

Some Local Authorities have already gone through a rigorous process of observing the commercial sector, testing new approaches with our own foster carers, learning what works, understanding what we need to do in order to maximise every lead, nurture every contact, to ensure as many successful application journeys as possible.

To create as many approved new foster carers as we can

There are steps and changes we can make to our Practices, Policies and Processes that will all make a huge difference, many of which are described later in this Good Practice Guide.

But it takes more than just those three Ps; this is not just about **WHAT** we do. It is much more about **HOW** we do it.

Foster Wales is built on five values, or behaviours, that make us who we are and will enable us to be more customer focused.

Foster Wales is **Powerful**, by being **Surprising** and **Forward Looking** whilst remaining **Dedicated** and **Real**.

These are not just words to stick up on a wall and become forgotten.

These are fundamental drivers that inform and influence the way we need to think, speak, and act every minute of every day.

We must change public misgivings around Local Authority, make more of our strengths and adapt to address our weaknesses. We need to challenge some of the negative myths and increase awareness of the different ways people can foster, and the diversity of people who can become foster carers.

But we cannot overpromise. We must remain honest and authentic and paint a real picture of the genuine possibilities of foster care across Wales, with all of its diversity and local character.

We need to make more of our specific expertise; we are real people, trained to provide the best outcomes for children and their foster carers. It's what we do. It's what we've always done.

And we must react to the changing dynamics of modern life, recognise that one size does not fit all, and tailor our service to adapt to those needs.

We must adapt to the needs of our customer, not expect them to fit in with our priorities.

**Everyone who works for Foster Wales,
in every Foster Wales team across the country, is**

**Powerful
Dedicated
Real
Surprising
Forward Looking**

Be Powerful

Every child who needs a foster home is in our care, we have legal responsibility for them. Every potential foster carer has a desire to give something back, to help build a better future for those children. We have the power to make that desire a reality.

When they make that first call, they are taking a tentative step into the unknown. They are taking a risk; they will be feeling curious, cautious, exposed, nervous.

We have the power to calm those nerves, to provide reassurance, to be on their side from the first second. To understand their concerns, and for our every action to focus on managing them.

This is a moment of truth. We have the power to capture it and turn it into a journey. But the first step on that journey is critical. We must make the most of every enquiry, we cannot afford to miss a single opportunity. We must...

Be Dedicated

Deciding to become a foster carer is a huge step, a leap into the unknown.

From the minute we receive their initial enquiry, it is our job to provide the reassurance and confidence that they can do this, and we are the right people for them to work with.

We must be dedicated to making the most of their moment of truth and making them feel like they are in safe hands from that moment forward. We must be committed to responding the same day, in a way that works for them.

“I felt like I was like speaking to an expert, every question that I asked, they knew the answer and they told me things which I hadn’t even thought of! I remember feeling like I trusted this

person and I quickly understood why fostering for my Local Authority was the only way for me to go.”

We must use that first contact to find out:

- when we can come and meet *them* in their home, either in person or via video call?
- When do *they* want to talk to us?
- what time works for *them*, on what day?

We must respond to *their* needs, not expect them to fit in with our availability.

We must offer a consistent service every day; we do not make empty promises at the beginning and then underdeliver, we are focused on supporting every step of their journey. We must...

Be Real

We're not a big, distant corporation.

We're real people, active in and connected to their community. We can talk to them about real life 'round our way'; we live in the same places they do, use the same shops, the same schools.

We have knowledge and understanding of the specific opportunities or challenges in our local areas, so we can always provide relevant conversation, build natural connections, and offer timely support.

We must be accessible and approachable, speak in natural, plain language that offers expertise and authority but doesn't blind people with jargon or acronyms.

We can provide real clarity on the process of becoming a foster carer, the support and training they will receive, the types of children and young people who need a foster carer, how almost anyone can be a great foster carer.

A lot of this information will challenge their misconceptions, make it feel very possible, flexible, diverse, and inclusive. In many ways, it will...

Be Surprising

There are too many false myths about fostering. About the types of people who can, or more crucially can't, foster. About the types of children who need fostering, a narrow picture of distress and disruption. Much of the language used about fostering is negative, focused on damaged children, neglect, drugs, abuse.

We know there is so much more to it than this, so it is our job to surprise them. To tell them about how flexible fostering actually is. Let them know about the different types of foster placements there are, from overnight stays to looking after children and parents together.

Help them see how diverse fostering is, how almost anyone can foster irrespective of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or marital status. How this is about families, sibling groups, growth, and opportunity. How, first and foremost, this is about **building better futures for local children.**

It's our job to blow the conversation open and reflect the energy, diversity and delight that comes from fostering.

There are negative perceptions of Local Authority too. That we're slow, under pressure, too busy, too stretched. That we are stuffy, stuck in the past, out of touch. 'The Council'.

It is our job to change that perception. We need to be quick, responsive, positive, energetic. To respond more quickly than they might expect, in a positive, upbeat manner that is all about the potential, reassuring and calm.

And while it is true that we have a long history, and our Local Authority is a very established organisation, we must change the perception that we're stuck in the past. With fostering, the most important step is the next one, so we use the experience of our past to...

Be Forward Looking

Creating a better future for a local child, and a better fostering experience for the people who care for them, is all about turning the page and helping them write the next chapter in their story.

To help people move forwards we need to look to the future, to work as a team with each other and our wider carer communities to build a better tomorrow for the children who are in our care today.

And that has to come across in the way we behave and communicate too. We must move on from methods and attitudes that anchor us in the past and distance us from our audience. We must embrace a fresh, positive approach.

We are an engaging, open, and modern organisation ready to work with contemporary, outcome-driven, and progressive foster carers. We're in touch, responding at the pace they expect.

We respond with pace, because we want to help them make a difference and the right time is now.

We want them to see that fostering can work for them, so we adapt to their needs and priorities, not the other way around.

We want them to be excited about the journey, so we respond with enthusiasm and empathy.

We want them to feel reassured about the next steps, so we talk them through the process and explain our dedicated expertise and support.

We want them to know that by fostering with the Foster Wales team, they are working with us to build better futures for local children.

WHAT we need to do: Practices, Policies and Processes

Practices

As described in this guide, the essential ingredient to successfully engaging with potential foster carers is a customer focused approach that is centred on them, their needs, their priorities.

So how can we achieve this?

Being customer focused requires us to look at the process from the customers view and create a journey which is entirely focused on their needs. So, we need to consider things like:

First impressions

The first experience prospective foster carers have when they first contact Foster Wales at our Local Authority, will reflect on the whole fostering service. If they have a really positive first impression when they contact us, and experience a quick, positive, engaging, and open response, they will naturally assume that we will provide a good service throughout their journey. First impressions count, and last.

Getting the tone right

During that first call, a lot of in-depth, personal information is gathered about someone who cannot see you or has never met you, so be as friendly and natural as possible. Take your time, do not rush and crucially, don't create the impression that you are busy or running out of time. There is no such thing as taking 'too much' time at this critical moment in their journey with us.

Your tone will go a long way to creating a positive first impression and will help them get to know you and your local Foster Wales team as they start to build a sense of trust and familiarity.

Using simple language and avoiding “jargon”

The processes and terms that we use every day are familiar and meaningful to us but will probably mean nothing to a prospective foster carer. It is really important to be conversational, talk in simple language, and avoid jargon and acronyms.

At best it may confuse people, at worst it could result in them not taking their interest any further which means we lose a lead.

For example, this could mean language like:

- asking people if they are calling about an initial enquiry, rather than asking if they’re interested in finding out more about fostering
- discussing the type of “placements” we need rather than talking about children, their stories, and their needs
- explaining about the “form F” rather than the careful assessment processes you will be going through in order to get their journey off to the right start

How they feel

Put yourself in their shoes. It is likely that the person is nervous and has decided to contact us after a lot of soul searching and conversations with friends and family. Be mindful of this and tread carefully, ask questions and spend more time listening than talking. Reflect back on what they tell you, which will help to show that you truly respect their decision to get in touch, and value their time.

Some examples are contained in the following diagrams. This is not meant to be prescriptive but is hopefully useful as a starting point to shaping your own customer-focused enquiry management strategy.

A Customer-Focused Approach to Recruitment Requires



They need...	So we must...
A Quick Response	Take calls or respond to emails when they come in; this is their moment of truth, so respect their choice and be there for them. If someone makes contact by phone, email, or enquiry form, we must respond the same day. This is what our competitors do, and we cannot afford to be any less dedicated, any less urgent. Give them your full attention and as much time as they need. The few minutes you invest now can translate into years of powerful foster care, so take your time, and give it to them.
Reassurance	Prepare for enquiries, be clear on your role, feel comfortable explaining the process and the opportunities in clear, simple, positive language. Be prepared to answer a variety of questions, have information to hand if you need clarification. Listen to, acknowledge, and respond to any concerns and worries, reassure them that these are to be expected. The decision to foster is a significant, life changing experience. Provide high levels of reassurance until they are clear on expectations.
Encouragement	Be energetic and positive about fostering, give examples of how it would work for the specific applicant. Listen to their story, ask conversational questions about their current circumstances and life experience

	Explain how diverse and inclusive fostering is, give real life examples Identify their strengths and support them to see how they will be relevant to their fostering journey.
Confidence	Explain the training and support they will receive, your Core Offer, your fostering community, your skills and experience in fostering, your services for children, support groups etc. What will your Foster Wales service do to instil confidence? Why is your Foster Wales service the best option for their fostering journey?
Honesty	Provide a balanced, realistic picture; fostering is rewarding for them, their family, and the children they will meet. It also comes with a level of responsibility which can at times be daunting and provide challenges. So, offer insight and clarity on the expectations of being a foster carer. What is it really like to foster with your Foster Wales LA service? Provide examples of how it has impacted on lives in your Foster Wales LA service, the positive outcomes that have been created Talk about the realities of fostering in your community, the kinds of children who are currently in need of foster care, the sorts of children or young people that might be right for them
Informed decision making	Be transparent, advise applicants of the ways in which children become looked after and the difference between Foster Wales and commercial providers – help them to make an informed decision, for the right reasons. Challenge myths and provide clarity based on real examples.

	Have some statements ready to reflect 'what our foster carers say about us'.
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Once you have asked all the right questions and gained a good understanding of who they are and what makes them tick, it's important to end the call appropriately.

Wherever possible, we need to....

Always be closing (booking that initial visit!)

Always offer prospective applicants a home visit within five working days of the initial contact unless the applicant asks for a visit on a specific date beyond that window.

Remember that it is possible they might also be speaking to other fostering services at the same time. How quickly do you think they will be arranging a visit? Can we afford to be slower?

If you feel there could be a problem fitting in a home visit within five working days, you must discuss this with your manager to avoid a delay.

Some applicants might not feel ready for a home visit at this early stage. It's important to listen and respond to their needs, so in this case make a plan to call them back at a time that works for them or invite them to attend an information evening where they can take a further tentative step and find out more.

It's vital to arrange this call back or follow up event straight away, rather than leaving it up to the prospective applicant to call you; this keeps the momentum up, keeps you on the front foot, and keeps them engaged with your Foster Wales service.

"I fostered with an IFA before transferring years later to my Local Authority. I had absolutely no idea of the difference between the two and nobody told me about these differences when I applied. I still cannot believe how quickly the IFA staff member arrived at my house; they came out the same day! I was not sure if I was

ready to take the next step, but I was, and they made it so easy for me. By the time the LA called me back a few days later, I was already signed up to the initial IFA training and I felt like I had made a commitment, it was too late.”

Processes

Whilst recognising that every Foster Wales team will have slight differences in terms of the team structure, team members, their skills and experience, it is so important for us all to benefit from the improvements that come from working in a way that is consistent with best practice, that is built on testing and learning.

The process journey below is based on a programme of testing, reflection, adaptation, and data analysis. It provides a useful starting point for every Foster Wales service as we evolve and improve our ability to make the most of every new enquiry from a potential foster carer.

Initial Contact Electronic / Face to Face Event
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What to Collate	What to Provide	Follow up actions
• Brief information, a telephone number and/or email is a must in order to have a way to respond. Collating both will ensure that you have what you need to maximise opportunities for follow up • For events have a postcard size easy to complete info card, don't be tempted to ask too many personal questions in public - set a date to call • Consider GDPR and ensure that you have a consent system in place	• An automated response system is a must for all electronic enquiries - ensure that the message says when and how you will get back to them. • If this first contact takes place at an event, the postcard could tear in two, one side for you and one for them. Both sides confirming the date of follow up and making a commitment. • Brochures can be a great way to showcase your offer when handed out in public	• Create and add all enquiries to an 'enquiry email group' until they are either approved or 'opt out' of follow up messages • Schedule email merges at critical peak times • Schedule email merges to advertise open events/virtual event • Having the systems in place to support the above is essential. Consider making best use of post panel processes and checks and monitoring for any 'opt out' requests

Telephone Contact

Directly into the service / Call backs

What to Collate	What to Provide	Follow up Actions
• This stage is detailed and will provide information for the assessment if you decide to accept the applicants and proceed to assess • You need to ask the right questions to know if the applicant is right for fostering and to ensure that all regulatory requirements can be met. An example proforma can be found in the appendix	• Time and privacy to take and consider the information fully • As much detail as possible about the task and how your service supports its foster carers • A date for a home visit, ensuring that all household members will be present. An example prompt card can be found in the appendix	• Any usual local practice preliminary checks • Schedule a call back date and time (if no HV) and ensure this is logged • Add contact email to 'enquiry' group • Send a brochure (if not already recived) along with a personalised letter to confirm when and who will be undertaking the home visit

Initial Home Visit

Face to Face / Virtual

What to Collate	What to Provide	Follow Up Actions
• As full a picture as possible of the whole family, the whole house and garden • Take time to explore the views and feelings of everybody in the household • Record as much detail as possible to inform the ongoing assessment. An example pro forma can be found in the appendix	• As many examples of how fostering works and the realities of the task • Information in relation to opportunities which your service provides for applicants to speak with approved foster carers • Detailed information about the process and usual duration to approval in your service • Transparency - share the record of your visit and seek their agreement	• Leave details of how to contact you if they have further questions • Ensure that a decision is made in respect of proceeding to the next stage within 48 hours, this should be provided in writing and over the phone • Provide the details and dates of preparation to foster training • Ensure a robust procedure for any enquiry closures which considers the reputation of the service

Initial Enquiry process and procedure

Every question asked of prospective applicants is done so for a reason and is useful information that is recorded, monitored, and evaluated. This information helps to assess that the service's messages and recruitment campaigns are reaching the right people, so it is vital you complete it all as fully as possible.

Even if a prospective applicant does not meet the eligibility criteria e.g. doesn't have a spare bedroom – you must still take down basic information e.g. at least their name, address and contact details to allow you to keep a record of who has contacted the service should things change for them in the future. All prospective applicants should receive an information pack, unless there are any concerns that would preclude this. Finding out where they heard about us is also critical to feed back into our campaign and marketing plans.

Preparation to Foster Training

The process of becoming a foster carer is heavily weighted in a need to gain information, to learn about the role and to really understand the impact that fostering could have on them. Opportunities to attend a thorough preparation training course should be provided as soon as possible after the home visit. This training reinforces for applicants if this is the right decision for them and it provides essential opportunity for reflection and peer learning.

If this is provided too late in the process, it can result in wasted time, energy, and financial resource invested into applicants who are yet to know for certain if this is right for them.

High quality pre-approval training is available in Wales and services should explore the benefits of securing this professionally delivered resource. Investing in accessible, timely, comprehensive and high-quality training will ensure that your service is preparing applicants robustly and demonstrating a commitment to them.

Structures, Systems and Resources

Much thought has been given to the ideal service structure for service delivery to be able to be at its best. Messages from research are clear, building well resourced, resilient, experienced, child centred, and highly responsive services is critical to achieving good outcomes for children. Foster Wales is much more than just numbers of enquiries and approvals, it's about the difference that we can make for children when our services and staff have the skills, experience, and right environment to be at their best.

Messages from research

In 2020 a good practice guide was published based on the findings from a UK-wide study of 52 case reviews concerning 98 children who had died or experienced serious harm while living with foster carers, adopters, or special guardians. This study was the first of its kind, spanning a 12-year period between 2007 – 2019 with 75% of the children in the study living with approved foster carers in England and Wales. It identified reoccurring themes in relation to the selection and assessment of carers; support and supervision; and the systems and practices of services.

High level key messages along with practice recommendations are summarised below.

Recruitment, Assessment & Approval – Key messages

- *The need for rigorous assessments that have a safeguarding focus*
- *Assessments undertaken by skilled professionals who understand the expectations of the role; are able to work authoritatively with potential carers; ensure open and honest exchange; apply critical appraisal and effective analysis; whilst upholding professional curiosity at all times*
- *Services ensuring that supervision is afforded to assessors from experienced staff, suitably trained with access to appropriate resources*

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- *Panels with members who are skilled, experienced, and suitably trained to enable them to exercise their function robustly, ensuring sufficient scrutiny of information during the approval process*

Translating into practice

The Foster Wales way is deeply rooted in a ***whole team approach***. We believe that a *whole team approach* provides the best possible structure to deliver on outcomes and to meet the key requirements identified from research. When supervising social workers hold responsibility for both the assessment of applicants and the supervision of approved foster carers, they are provided with opportunity to develop the most robust understanding of the task. This knowledge and experience can be applied across both elements to translate into child centred, flexible and resilient foster carers.

Combine this with skilled supervisors, systems for quality assurance which run throughout every layer and a rigorous foster panel, you create the perfect environment to achieve best practice and deliver good outcomes for children.

The whole team approach also supports the delivery of **relationship centred** practice, a key factor for delivering improved outcomes. During the fostering assessment process applicants invest significant time in developing a trusting relationship with a social worker. They share intimate details about their childhood, personal life, their strengths and vulnerabilities. The assessing social worker ascertains knowledge of the family which is critical for matching and meeting ongoing support needs.

Wherever possible we should avoid severing the relationship between the assessing social worker and the newly approved fostering family. Services which enable this relationship to be maintained for at least the first 6 months post approval, and ideally longer are likely to provide the best possible start for newly approved foster carers and therefore the best fostering placement for a child.

Social workers who assess fostering households and are then also tasked with the ongoing support role are highly likely to invest more into their role. Knowing that you will be tasked with working with these applicants once they are approved increases

aspirations to ensure that the applicants are prepared and ready to be their best as foster carers.

Try to achieve.....	Try to avoid.....
A service where newly-approved foster carers and their households are supported by the same social worker who took them through the assessment journey	A service operating in sections which pass applicants from one section to another and so on. Resulting in different workers, reduced relationships, lack of continuity, knowledge and trust.
Why.....	Why...
• Good matches are made when social workers know the strengths, vulnerabilities and inside functioning of a family. • Foster Carers place increased levels of trust in a social worker that they respect and have developed a relationship with, they are more likely to believe that they can care for a certain child or take on a specific task. • Quality and meaningful support can be provided when foster carers need it the most, right at the start of their journey. • The assessor knows all of the important factors which can make a difference, they are best placed to know what to say and what to do, to nurture newly approved foster carers.	• Building relationships takes time, it can rarely be achieved in the short transition between the day of foster panel and first fostering match. • Expecting newly approved foster carers to change social worker at the same point as asking them to step into the unknown of caring for their first looked after child can feel daunting and anxious • Gaps in allocation can mean that in reality newly approved foster carers do not have the support they need when they need it the most. • A newly allocated worker will need time to learn the family norms, personality, support mechanisms and critical matching factors. • Service pressures can mean that newly allocated staff do not have capacity to read the Form F assessment.

Foster Wales aspires to deliver a service with people at the heart of what we do. We want to move away from practice norms which suit service need and move towards delivering quality for children and foster carers. For some foster carers, changes in worker and being supported in the very early stage of approval by workers who do not know them well enough to match, support and nurture can result in early resignation. Foster Wales is about retention and recruitment; they go hand in hand.

If your service is structured in a way where mainstream recruitment and assessment is undertaken in isolation, and/or by a small number of staff it may be more likely to be open to vulnerabilities. These include pressures on capacity, responsiveness and robustness, along with limitations in preparation for the task ahead. Resilience comes in numbers and from a team with shared understanding, goals and values. Foster Wales seeks to grow this area of service provision and for some this may require a reconfiguration of staff to ensure the ability to meet demands.

Questions to Consider

- Do we have a team of skilled and experienced professionals who understand the expectations of the fostering task, work with authority, honesty and professional curiosity at all times?
- Do we have a structure which ensures that these staff are available (on a rota or similar basis), all day, every working day to answer and respond to initial enquires promptly, with expertise, customer focused approach and professional judgement?
- Do we have capacity for these experienced staff members to undertake initial (home) visits within 5 working days of the initial contact or as soon as possible?
- Do we have high quality, competitive, regularly scheduled pre-approval training for applicants to access within a few weeks of their application or sooner if possible?
- Do we have capacity to allocate and complete assessments within 4 – 6 months, by staff members with a robust knowledge of the task, who uphold our values and prepare applicants fully for the task ahead?
- Do our caseloads facilitate quality, meaningful, person centred practice to be undertaken in both the assessment of, and supervision of foster carers?

- Does everyone in the service have access to regular, effective supervision from experienced and appropriately trained staff?
- Do we have enough panel capacity to respond to the demands within timescales?
- Are our panel members skilled, do they engage in professional development, and afford rigor to the task, is panel membership diverse and representative of the voice of the child, care experienced and foster carers?
- Do we have quality assurance mechanisms in place at every stage of the process? Are these understood, reviewed and updated regularly?

Capacity

Many services have acknowledged the impact that connected persons/kinship fostering can have on the ability to meet demands in mainstream fostering and most have taken action to address. Court timetabled work will always impose competing demands and the separation of these areas of service delivery is reported to work well, with proven benefits and improved outcomes all round.

The table below demonstrates two **mainstream only fostering service structure options**. These are examples of how capacity and demands could be best met and ways to ensure resilience in teams. Both options consider the same number of staff as an in-put, they deliver differing outputs based on configuration and use of resources.

RESOURCE AVAILABLE AND TASKS	OPTION 1 – Separate assessment and support functions	OPTION 2 – Whole team approach
10 full time social workers	- 7 staff dedicated to supporting an average of 17 households each - 3 staff dedicated to recruitment and assessment, each completing 5 full	- 10 staff dedicated to support and recruitment with caseloads of 12 households to support and each completing 2 full assessments every 6 months

	assessments every 6 months	
Capacity to support households	120	120
Capacity to respond to enquiries and initial visits	1 full day in every 3 Shared between dedicated recruitment staff	1 full day in every 10 Shared between all staff
Capacity to assess and approve households	30	40

This example structure demonstrates that a whole team approach can support an increase in productivity and outcomes, with valuable additional assessment capacity being achieved.

When it comes to identifying the best structure for your LA, every Foster Wales service will have differing demands, resources and targets to consider. The ultimate aim is to ensure that you are able to achieve your goals. Making best use of the experience, knowledge and connections available as part of Foster Wales is a great place to start when it comes to service planning.

Staff Qualifications

The importance of suitably skilled, experienced and qualified staff has been identified throughout this good practice guide. Further clarity and regulatory information can be found in the AFA practice note on Fostering Staff Qualifications. [Fostering - AFA Cymru](#)

Leaders who promoted and developed a resilient, whole team approach to responding to enquiries and recruitment reported that this was the key factor to achieving best outcomes, the data also reflects this message. Interested applicants will not wait until someone returns from leave or until the sole responsible staff member for recruitment is available. They will contact the next service on their list.

For staff to feel confident to perform the recruitment role they need to have in-depth knowledge and experience. It is much harder to offer the same level of reassurance and insight when assessing and preparing a fostering family if you have not supported a fostering family through the types of complex and challenging situations which they will be expected to face.

*Rarely can anything replace the authority provided by experience and insight. It empowers staff to be able to offer honest **powerful** responses; afford **real** and reassuring examples; convey the **dedication** of the team and the community of foster carers; **surprise** and excite applicants; ultimately to demonstrate without question that your service is **forward looking** and the service of choice for them.*

Independent Assessors

The potential for significant growth in recruitment of foster carers has never been more real than it is now. Along with this comes the need to consider the impact on services and our capacity to respond. With this in mind we reached out to practitioners to explore what works well and what triggers worries in relation to allocating assessments to independent assessors.

INDEPENDENT ASSESSORS

What works well	What are the worries
• Can be cost effective in terms of number of assessments if all proceed to approval/completion • Can offer a degree of flexibility that may not be routinely available from in house staff • Independent viewpoint outside of	• Consistency and quality of assessment may vary/ be reduced as assessors are external to the service and organisation • Additional quality assurance is often needed – impacting on capacity • Access to supervision, support and training can be limited/restricted/not provided or accepted • Investment, commitment and understanding of Foster Wales values and behaviours is unlikely to be upheld or as strong as in-house staff • Often undertake work for multiple organisations and have no reason to afford loyalty to the LA

organisation can promote fair and balanced view and not be influenced by organisational factors • Does not impact on support capacity	• Continuity for applicant, service, and the ability to offer a customer focused approach is removed or restricted • Lack of accountability for content of assessment and preparation of applicant • Requires additional administrative support • Access to LA systems and equipment is restricted • Data security considerations for the use of personal devices to undertake assessment work can create barriers • Not dedicated to the fostering service, may not be available as and when needed • Unknown skillset, baseline knowledge and understanding of fostering expectations
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Quality Assurance & Monitoring

Ensuring quality and maintaining standards, whilst also managing increasing demands on your service is likely to be a welcome but significant challenge. A number of suggested processes, systems and mechanisms for monitoring could be considered.

- **Appointing a senior practitioner or equivalent graded post** to oversee the recruitment section of the team is well established practice in many LAs. This post holder can ensure the good practice standards are embedded and upheld. They can ensure consistency in practice, afford supervision and guidance, hold decision making responsibility for continuing or closing down applications /assessments. Provide oversight and responsivity to key performance data collation and analysis. This oversight is critical when taking forward a whole service approach to recruitment and assessment.
- **Creating or embedding standard templates for supervision and oversight.** Quality assuring all aspects of recruitment and form F assessment is a great way to ensure good practice is achieved, maintained and understood. We've included some example templates at the end of this guide.

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- **Building in routine opportunities to obtain feedback**, such as questionnaires or electronic feedback at each stage of the recruitment process ensures learning and development for the service. This extends past recruitment and into retention. Undertaking exit interviews when foster carers leave the service can provide a wealth of insight whether they are in the early stages of enquiry or many years into their fostering career.
 - **Staff induction, ongoing learning & development.** Our Foster Wales behaviours and values need to be understood internally to be able to be delivered externally. Staff should be afforded a robust induction programme with regular opportunities for ongoing professional learning and development. Significant safeguarding responsibilities are attached to the recruitment & assessment of potential foster carers for vulnerable children. Attending initial, and refresher form F assessment training regularly should be considered a minimum requirement.

Fostering Regulations

This guide is intended to identify what constitutes good practice in relation to the recruitment of foster carers. The following section will outline the main regulatory requirements and expectations connected to this task. Full practice guidance in respect of **assessment** and **foster panel** can be accessed here [Fostering-Panel-regs-Good-Practice-Guide AFA](#)

Two sets of regulations apply to Local Authority Fostering Provision

- **The Local Authority Fostering Services (Wales) Regulations 2018.** As amended by the Local Authority Fostering Services (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2019/545 These are issued under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWB(W)A 2014) with an accompanying Code of Practice.
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2018/1339/made/data.pdf>
- **The Fostering Panels (Establishment and Functions) (Wales) Regulations 2018.** These are issued under SSWB(W)A 2014 and are applicable to both Local Authority and

Independent Fostering Service Providers.

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2018/1333/made/data.pdf>

Initial Enquiry/ Registration of Interest

There is no reference in the regulations to the process by which interested people make their initial enquiries and the service responds. However, it is clearly essential that sufficient information is shared and gathered at the Initial Enquiry stage to enable an early, mutually agreed, assessment of suitability.

At this very initial stage, services should provide factual advice to applicants about fostering and what would be expected of them and the service in terms of assessment and support. This should be in the form of an information pack or an online resource that applicants can access, alongside a discussion with a member of staff.

If the staff member is not a social work practitioner with experience of fostering, clear guidelines in respect of expectations and limitations should be in place. Services must be able to satisfy themselves as to why they do not require this initial assessment stage to be undertaken by a qualified, experienced social worker.

Eligibility Considerations

There are very few eligibility criteria to be a foster parent set out in regulations:

- Age 18 or over with no upper age limit
- No person, or member of the person's household should have been convicted or cautioned of specified offence.

Unlike adoption there are no set criteria for domicile or habitual residence in the British Islands, although if an applicant is unable to evidence settled status, this will affect their ability to provide stability for long-term fostering in the same way as in adoption.

Services should ensure that any additional eligibility requirements, specific to their Local Authority are produced in line with the need to promote fostering as a positive choice. These work best when they are not unnecessarily restrictive, positively reflective of diversity and consider all parties who enquire to foster with the service, be they mainstream or connected persons.

Initial Visits (Home Visits)

It is essential that suitably qualified and experienced practitioners undertake Initial Visits as they will be gathering and sharing critical and relevant information that they will need to consider, analyse and decide or make recommendation upon.

regulation 29 (2) of The Local Authority Fostering Services (Wales) Regulations 2018 states.... a person is not fit to work at the service unless— (b)the person has the qualifications, skills, competence and experience necessary for the work they are to perform

This aspect of service delivery (*work to be performed*) is considered a social work assessment task.

The new two stage process does not change practitioners existing responsibilities to ensure that principles of openness and honesty apply, and good decisions are made based on information, which is gathered, shared and analysed.

These visits should be conducted in an applicant's own home. If applying as a couple, both applicants should be present for the full discussion and if possible, any existing children in the home should be met.

Decisions to Proceed or Close

It is important to remember that at this point and at Stage 1 of the assessment, we are considering applicants who “may be suitable” to foster and practitioners should ensure that they collect and share relevant information for this stage of the process.

The fostering services provider is eligible to consider whether the applicant's “offer” is compatible with its recruitment objectives and may decide not to assess or may refer to another service. In reality, this is unlikely to happen in light of the current need to increase foster service provision in all areas. Closure decisions made at this point should not be based on a predicted approval status. It is common for applicants to be unsure about their fostering abilities at this point and any expressed preferred age range or approval restrictions should be noted and explored thoroughly as part of the full assessment process.

Agreement about whether or not to decide to assess at this stage should be made at Senior Practitioner/Team Manager level and they should be involved in notifying the applicants. A decision to refuse to consider an applicant for Stage 1 of the assessment process should only be made where there is clear evidence that applicants are not safe or suitable to care for children and that no reasonable fostering services provider would consider them suitable to foster.

It is not acceptable to undertake any checks before Stage 1 process has commenced and without the explicit consent of the applicants.

Fostering services providers should have a series of pro formas, these should include:

1. A letter following Initial Visit notifying that the applicants are not eligible or suitable, providing clear reasons for decision.

There also needs to be clear evidence of decision making on file / system.

2. A letter following Initial Visit notifying that the applicants are suitable to proceed, providing the dates for the next preparation training.
3. If an Initial Visit is positive apart from some key practical details which would prevent an assessment starting, the fostering services provider should send a letter suggesting that applicants return after a period of time in which the applicants will have altered an element of their life necessary (e.g. work on the house or move; cessation of smoking). The letter should say that the service will contact the applicants again after the agreed length of time if they themselves are not contacted.

Terms of Approval

One of the critical factors to consider when striving to achieve a robust and resilient foster carer workforce is the terms on which foster carers are approved. To offer the best possible placement options requires child focused, wide terms of approval. This approach enables the best possible matches to be made, provides opportunity for growth in skills and abilities, and streamlines the service to make the best use of the resources available at any one time. It's another opportunity to uphold consistency and transparency for everyone involved.

Children need foster carers who can say “yes” to caring for them; foster carers who are well prepared; well assessed; and with approval statuses which *enable* the team to make the call and complete the match, in the first place.

Terms of approval should reflect a full and thorough assessment which concludes on three main factors

1. The ability to provide permanency, or short-term / task centred care
2. The skills and ability to care for a particular age range of children
3. The capacity to care for a particular number of children up to a max of 3

What does this mean in practice?

It is best to try to limit the variety of specific types or terms to the two primary and most frequently recognised **short-term** (task centred) and **long-term** (permanence). When services introduce a range of ‘types’ in practice it can mean that access to foster carers can be limited or restricted due to the label placed upon them, rather than their skill set or availability.

- Short-term – this is considered to be a standard term for everyone approved to foster. It’s about the task, from an hour’s day care, an overnight stay, or for some years. Respite, short-breaks, support care, they are all types of fostering which come under the term ‘short’ and by using the generic term, you ensure that vacancies can be accessed, and matches can be made.
- Long-term – this term is for those households who have been assessed to provide permanency for children. It requires an added dimension of assessment and analysis to evidence the significant commitment, it is not to be applied casually. In contrast to mainstream fostering the vast majority of connected persons assessments will explore applicant’s ability to provide permanency from the start due to the needs of the child being known and the pre-existing relationship which exists. This is less common for new mainstream applicants; however, the applicant’s motives may be clear from the start.

Specialist Tasks

If your service operates any specialist schemes which require additional assessments to be undertaken, such as Parent & Child placements, these can also be reflected in the foster carer's approval status if the assessment criteria have been fulfilled. Specific training and advice is available in respect of this specialist area, as there are many complicating factors to consider. The approval status should make clear if this additional task is undertaken alongside usual fostering provision OR as an alternative when no other children are placed. Guidance would recommend the latter option as matching factors and risks can become too great to mitigate.

Age Range

Many services have moved towards a comprehensive approach when it comes to considering age range approval in fostering. They assess (and most importantly prepare) all applicants against their ability to provide foster care to children and young people aged 0-18 years, often highlighting a preference or significant matching factors. This approach acknowledges that in reality an age means very little in the matching process, as the functioning age and chronological age of children can be two different considerations. It also reflects that household dynamics can change over time, birth children grow older or are born, employment commitments increase or reduce, matching factors can change day to day.

For those foster carers approved to provide long term care, the age range by definition of the task must be 0-18 years. Services must also consider the requirement to provide care past the age of 18 years, under When I'm Ready arrangements. These conversations should be held very early on to ensure stability can be provided according to our Welsh context and expectations.

When services embed practice expectations to assess against wide approval statuses for those who offer short term provision, it facilitates matching and provides room for growth and development. When households are assessed and approved in line with a wide age range, they are not only available to consider all options, but they can also offer ad hoc care to children outside of a specified 'comfort zone' to grow their confidence, supporting robust and resilient practice. **The critical factor is to ensure**

that thorough assessment has been undertaken and that the evidence in the report reflects the approval status recommended.

Children in the home

The age of children (birth/step/fostered/adopted) already living in the home is another factor which influences recruitment practice and is sometimes used to place unwarranted age restrictions on families right from the point of enquiry. Some foster carers cite this restriction as the primary reason for choosing to foster with an IFA, over an LA, as the LA would only approve them for children younger than their own. There is a need for further research in respect of this practice as much of the historic research contains conflicting findings. Some research findings from 2015 onwards identify that we should consider moving away from outdated 'norms' and remove these unnecessary restrictions. There is evidence of stable matches being formed with all ages of children, those aged close together or far apart, older and younger. Studies have also found (unexpectedly) that the more children living in a foster household reduces the likelihood of placement disruption.

Ultimately the key message to factor into our practice is that stability is achieved by good matching, underpinned by clear child focused policy and procedure, which is based on communication, planning and consultation with children and adults.
Restrictive terms of approval do not create stability.

Gender

Current guidance advises that the best approach to take is one which assumes that foster carers are approved (and assessed) to care for all genders. If your service does wish to cite this specifically in terms of approval the CoramBAAF practice note (PN70) states *it is better to use the term "any gender" rather than "either gender", as this will not exclude non-binary trans young people*. Matching factors may preclude a foster carer for caring for a specific gender at certain times or the foster carers may

demonstrate a specific skill set or preference. The service can make best use of these factors without excluding children or young people.

Capacity

The numbers of children able to be cared for within the foster carers home is assessed on both skillset and space. Usually, the number of available bedrooms is the pivotal factor, and it is important that this is reflected, along with identifying if there would also be space for siblings to share. The regulations allow for a maximum of three unrelated children to be placed, this would require three separate bedrooms to align with good practice.

Examples of suitable wording

1 child (2 if siblings), aged 0-18, short-term or long-term

In this example the foster carers have one bedroom available to foster which is also large enough to accommodate two children comfortably if they are siblings. They have demonstrated their ability to care for a wide range of children on both a task-centred basis and to offer permanence.

2 children (or sibling group), aged 5-18, short-term

In this example the foster carers have two bedrooms available to foster and both rooms are large enough to accommodate bedroom sharing. This means that pending bedroom sharing a sibling group could be placed over the usual limit of three. The carers use a vape and therefore cannot be considered as suitable to care for children under five years. They also evidenced their ability to undertake task-centred fostering only and have the skills and ability to support transitions but not permanence at this time.

Whatever approach your service chooses to take, it's important to keep in mind that a foster carer's initial terms of approval cannot not be changed without a full annual review and presentation back to panel, followed by a decision maker endorsement. It's in everyone's best interest to consider a forward-thinking approach to assessment, preparation and approval of foster carers.

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The Association for Fostering and Adoption Cymru (AFA Cymru) is a Welsh charity that promotes good practice across the breadth of permanency planning for children and young people. It also offers advice, training and consultancy to professionals and members of the public to support best practice.

References and Further Reading

[Adult-Health-Reports-practice-note.pdf \(afacymru.org.uk\)](#)

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[Undertaking a fostering assessment in Wales | CoramBAAF](#)