

AFKA Cymru

Transitions from Residential
Care to Foster Care:

A Practitioners Guide to Supporting Children Looked After in Wales



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INTRODUCTION

Transitions from residential care to foster placements represent a critical juncture in the lives of children and young people. When carefully planned and supported, these transitions can offer new opportunities for stability, healing, and belonging within a family setting. In Wales, where the drive to reduce reliance on residential care is embedded in policy and good practice, it is vital to ensure that step-down transitions are trauma-informed, child-centred, and sustainable.

This guide, which is funded by Welsh Government, has been designed for practitioners working with children transitioning from a residential placement into a foster care placement. This guide is intended to support children during transitions, ensuring they feel valued, understood, and safe in their new home.

Children may have found themselves in a residential care setting without much preparation beforehand. This move may have broken their primary attachment relationships and may have been (re-) traumatising for them. Therefore, the transfer of the child back into a family setting needs to be planned carefully and the foster carers need to be well prepared to minimise the risk of a further placement breakdown.

The transition process is connected to a number of emotions both on the side of the carers (both in residential setting and foster care) and the child which can range from anxiety to grief, relief or anticipation. A child that has experienced developmental trauma may also show behaviours related to insecure attachment and mistrust in the grown-ups and will require empathy and therapeutic parenting strategies from their foster carers.

Practitioners in Local Authority fostering teams have reported, during consultation, that foster carers are often cautious in accepting children from residential settings into their home. Stigma exists and there is a fear of the 'unknown' that somehow children currently living in a residential placement are more challenging to care for than other children. This is not actually reflective of the children and young people who have benefitted from living in a residential environment and are now ready to move back into a family environment.

This guide is easy to access and in an easy-to-read format, designed to highlight the steps needed to be taken to support children and foster carers through the transition from residential care to foster care. This guide will also consider the needs of the residential team who may be new in their roles and have never undertaken such sensitive work before.

Transitions from residential care to foster care in Wales should be viewed as an opportunity for growth, not a risk. With the right planning for young people, investment in staff, and robust support for foster carers, young people can thrive in family settings. The goal is not simply to move them, but to move them well, with dignity, preparation, and the long-term in mind.

AFKA Cymru would like to thank the practitioners and foster carers who were consulted to support the learning in this guide.

A special thank you to AFKA Cymru's Associate Trainer, Martina Wolter, who has delivered training, funded by Welsh Government, on this topic to practitioners and foster carers across Wales since 2021 and whose knowledge base and expertise this guide is based on.

CHALLENGING THE MYTHS: MESSAGES FOR FOSTER CARERS

Children and young people who live in residential children's homes are often surrounded by a host of harmful myths and misconceptions. One of the most persistent is the belief that these children are "too difficult" to be cared for in a family setting. In reality, many young people in residential care have experienced instability or trauma, but this does not define who they are or what they need. Residential care can provide a period of structure, safety, and healing which is a stepping stone rather than a permanent label. These young people, like all others, thrive with the right support and relationships, and many are ready and able to transition into loving foster homes when the time is right.

Another often-overlooked fact is that children coming from residential settings have typically had access to regular therapeutic interventions, educational support, and behavioural guidance. This means that by the time they are considered ready for fostering, they have already engaged in structured support systems designed to help them manage emotions, build trust, and develop resilience. Foster carers should see this as a positive: these children have had the chance to reflect, learn, and grow, often more so than children in less supported settings. Far from needing specialist care, what they really need is patience, consistency, and a genuine belief in their potential.

It is also a myth that fostering a child from residential care requires specialist skills or qualifications. What it truly requires is empathy, openness, and a willingness to see beyond a child's past. These children are not defined by their time in a children's home. They are individuals with dreams, humour, intelligence, and immense potential. What they need are families who can see the person, not the file. Foster carers are not expected to have all the answers, just a heart for connection, and a home where a young person can feel valued.

By opening their homes to young people from residential care, foster carers can offer more than shelter, they offer a fresh start. These children have often had time to stabilise, reflect, and build trusting relationships with adults. That journey continues in foster care, where the rewards can be especially meaningful. Seeing a young person flourish in a family environment after residential care is a powerful reminder of the difference that fostering can make. It's not about being a specialist; it's about being someone who cares and believes in change.



THE ROLE OF RESIDENTIAL STAFF IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Residential care staff play a vital role in the lives of children and young people in preparing children for foster placements, often becoming consistent, trusted adults during critical periods of healing and development. Their professional commitment and emotional investment make them key figures in building trust and stability.

During a young person's stay in residential care, staff become more than just professionals, they become trusted caregivers, mentors, and role models. They hold crucial insight into a child's history, coping mechanisms, triggers, communication style, and emotional needs. Their voices must be central in transition planning, helping inform whether the child is ready to step down and what kind of foster placement is most likely to succeed.

Children often look to residential staff to understand whether a move is safe and positive. If staff demonstrate belief in the placement and communicate confidence in the foster carers, this reassurance can significantly ease the child's anxiety. On the other hand, if staff feel excluded from the process or lack confidence in the match, children are more likely to internalise those uncertainties.

For this reason, it is essential that staff are fully invested in their roles, not just as employees, but as part of a stable, nurturing environment. This means creating career pathways with clear progression, strong training frameworks, and recognition of residential care as a respected, skilled profession. When staff are supported to grow, feel proud of where they work, and are part of a strong team culture, a "family" in its own right, they are more likely to stay, build deeper relationships with the children, and create the consistency that young people so urgently need. "Stickability" isn't just a desirable trait, it's the foundation of safe, trusting care that helps children move forward with confidence.

Transitions can be emotionally challenging for staff, especially when they have built meaningful attachments with the children. Supporting residential staff through transition periods, whether it's a change in a young person's care plan, a move into foster care, or shifts within the team, is essential for maintaining stability and quality of care. Staff need space to process the impact of change, ongoing training, reflective supervision, and access to emotional support must be embedded as standard practice. When staff feel supported and emotionally safe, they are better equipped to manage change positively, model resilience for the young people, and maintain a high standard of care. Investing in staff wellbeing during these key moments reinforces their value and helps retain experienced, dedicated professionals who are central to children's progress.

Good Practice to Support Successful Transitions:

- **Include Staff in all Transition Meetings and Planning Discussions:** Staff must be part of the planning and matching process. Recognise that they understand the child's needs and the pace with which transitions need to take place.
- **Give Staff Opportunities to Meet Foster Carers:** share knowledge directly and build collaborative relationships that support continuity of care.
- **Maintain Relationships:** Relationships with children should be honoured and, where appropriate, continued through contact. This involvement also validates staff's emotional investment, acknowledging the significance of the relationships they've built and helping them manage their own experiences of loss when a child moves on.
- **Value Staff:** The team must recognise and validate staff contributions during transitions. Their input is invaluable to placement success.
- **Training Needs:** Staff must be offered training specific to transitions, including managing grief, saying goodbye well, and supporting contact post-placement.
- **Personal Development:** Staff must feel valued through structured career development, robust training, and emotional support. Provide reflective supervision and clinical support.



PREPARING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Preparation is fundamental to any successful transition, especially for children and young people who have experienced trauma, loss, or disrupted attachments. For many, residential care may have been their first experience of consistent adult relationships, and the idea of moving into a family can evoke hope, but also fear, uncertainty, and grief. A child-centred, trauma-informed approach to preparation is essential.



Good Practice to Support the Young Person:

- **Involve the Child in Planning:** Where appropriate, young people should be included in decisions about their future. This might include helping to choose photos for a profile shared with the foster family, attending planning meetings in a child-friendly format, or creating their own “All About Me” book.
- **Keep Plans Simple:** Focus on each day, one day at a time to avoid the young person becoming overwhelmed with complex timetables.
- **Relationship Building Before the Move:** The foster carer should be introduced slowly and at a pace that suits the young person. Start with photo books or video messages, followed by short visits in neutral settings, progressing to home visits and overnight stays if the child is comfortable. Remember the importance of pets as an unconditional, 'transitional object/ice breaker'.
- **Life Journey and Therapeutic Work:** Children benefit from understanding their journey. Life journey work helps them make sense of their past, understand the reasons for change, and begin to trust in the new path ahead. This can also ease anxieties around identity and belonging.
- **Routines and Consistency:** Maintaining familiar routines (such as school, meals, bedtime) can help create a sense of safety during the transition. The foster carer should be informed of the child's preferences and daily structure in advance.
- **Saying Goodbye Well:** It's crucial to allow time for children to process the move and say goodbye to the people who have cared for them, both peers and staff. This helps reduce feelings of abandonment and promotes emotional closure.
- **Aftercare Contact:** Continued appropriate contact with key residential staff (e.g. check-ins, letters, visits) can offer emotional reassurance and bridge the transition. This also helps the young person understand that relationships don't have to end when circumstances change.



By approaching preparation with patience, openness, and emotional sensitivity, professionals and carers can significantly reduce the risk of placement breakdown and support the young person to engage with their new family environment from a place of safety.

Challenges for the Young Person	Solutions
Fear of change	Offer consistent, predictable routines and reassurances
Trauma responses (fight/flight/freeze)	Ensure patience, attunement, and validation
Difficulty forming relationships	Plan gradual introductions and trust-building exercises
Resistance to new caregivers	Engage the child in transition planning and decision-making

SUPPORTING FOSTER CARERS

Foster carers are central to the success of a step-down transition and must be given thorough preparation, ongoing support, and confidence that they are not alone in the journey. Too often, carers are hesitant to foster young people from residential settings due to misconceptions or lack of information (see Section 2). By reframing their understanding and ensuring wraparound support, carers can feel equipped and empowered.

Good Practice to Support Foster Carers:

- **Honest and Strengths-Based Information Sharing:** Foster carers should be provided with a full and balanced understanding of the young person's experiences, challenges, and strengths. This includes details of therapeutic progress, coping strategies, and any unresolved trauma or triggers, not just risk factors. Transparency builds trust and avoids surprises.
- **Pre-Placement Training and Matching:** Foster carers need training tailored to trauma, attachment, regulation strategies, and building trust and understanding blocked care. Where possible, training should be interactive and delivered by experienced and skilled practitioners. Careful matching should ensure foster carers are ready to meet the young person's needs and that the young person has been involved in the matching process.
- **Relationship-Focused Approach:** Emphasis should be placed on the importance of connection and relational safety over immediate behavioural correction. Foster carers should be encouraged to focus on building trust slowly, expecting that setbacks will occur but are part of the healing process. Foster carers would benefit from using a PACE approach.
- **Regular Supervision and Emotional Support:** Foster carers should have easy access to support from supervising social workers, therapeutic advisors, peer support groups and their own support networks. Emotional resilience is key, and carers need safe spaces to reflect, debrief, and process their own emotional responses to the challenges and joys of fostering.
- **Support from the Residential Team:** In the early weeks of transition, contact with residential staff can be vital. Foster carers should be encouraged to connect with staff who know the young person well, whether for advice on routines, triggers, or just a reminder of what works.
- **Ongoing Learning Opportunities:** Post-placement learning, such as reflective workshops, peer learning sessions, or trauma-informed practice refreshers, can help foster carers deepen their understanding over time and feel part of a professional care team.



By building a culture of support, compassion, and shared responsibility around foster carers, local authorities can increase placement stability and reinforce foster carers' sense of value and belonging within the wider care system. When foster carers feel supported, they are more likely to weather challenges and help young people thrive.



POST-TRANSITION SUPPORT

The period following a young person's move from residential care into a foster home is just as important as the preparation and planning stages. Transition is not a one-off event, it is a process that unfolds over time, and success depends heavily on the support available after the move. In the days, weeks, and months following placement, the young person and foster carers may face emotional, behavioural, and relational challenges as everyone adjusts to a new dynamic. Providing consistent, well-coordinated post-transition support is vital to ensuring stability and helping the young person feel safe and connected in their new home.

Good Practice for Post-Transition Support:

- **A Gradual Handover**

Children and young people should not be expected to sever ties with previous support networks the moment they move. Key residential staff, therapeutic workers, and trusted adults should remain available for planned, purposeful contact. This helps maintain a sense of continuity, eases anxiety, and reinforces the message that relationships are safe and enduring, even through change. Where appropriate, joint visits between residential staff and foster carers can support this handover and build trust across systems.

- **Therapeutic and Emotional Support for the Young Person**

The move to a family home can stir up unresolved trauma, attachment fears, and memories even when the transition is positive. Continued access to therapy, mentoring, or a keyworker figure can help the young person process their emotions and adjust to family life at their own pace. This support should be flexible and individualised, with clear communication between the therapeutic team and the fostering team to ensure joined-up care.



• **Ongoing Support and Supervision for Foster Carers**

Foster carers will need regular, reliable supervision in the post-transition period, not just to manage practical matters, but to explore the emotional impact of the placement. Support must go beyond formal check-ins and include:

- Responsive access to help during difficult moments (e.g. out of hours support).
- Space to reflect on behaviours through a trauma lens.
- Practical guidance on routines, boundaries, and managing challenges.
- Encouragement and reassurance that some difficulties are expected and don't mean failure.

Support should come from a multi-disciplinary team, including the child's social worker, the fostering supervising social worker, therapeutic specialists and, where helpful, previous residential carers.

• **Placement Stability Reviews**

Early and frequent placement reviews are critical. These meetings should involve the young person, foster carers, social workers, and any relevant professionals. Reviews should focus on:

- What's working well.
- What challenges are emerging.
- What additional support might be needed.
- How the young person feels about the transition and their new environment.

Importantly, reviews should avoid a deficit-focused tone and instead celebrate progress, however small. This builds the confidence of both the carer and the young person, reinforcing the belief that the placement can succeed. More detailed information can be found in AFKA Cymru's Guide to [Improving Placement Stability for Children Looked After in Foster Placements](#)

- **Community and Peer Support**

Feeling part of a community helps foster carers and young people feel less isolated. Foster carers should be linked to peer support groups or buddy systems with others who have supported children from residential settings. Similarly, young people may benefit from opportunities to connect with other care-experienced children through clubs, mentoring, or group work. These networks create spaces for shared experience, belonging, and mutual encouragement.

- **Contingency Planning and Flexibility**

Despite the best efforts, some placements may face significant challenges. Having clear contingency plans in place, without threatening disruption, helps foster carers and young people feel more secure. These plans might include temporary breaks (e.g. natural style respite), access to additional therapeutic support, or changes in routines. Planning should be framed positively, with an emphasis on preserving the placement rather than preparing for failure.

- **Invest in the Journey, Not the Destination**

When post-transition support is consistent, compassionate, and collaborative, it reinforces to the young person that they are not alone and that adults are working together to help them succeed. It also gives foster carers the tools and confidence they need to provide loving, stable, long-term care. The success of a placement doesn't depend on perfection, but on the strength of the support system that wraps around both the child and the family, every step of the way.



NEXT STEPS

If you would like to bring the learning in this guide to life for your service please contact AFKA Cymru to commission the training course for this guidance - [Training Request - AFKA Cymru](#)

The training course uses case examples and encourages discussion between the attendees to ensure that best practice is achieved.

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“Today’s training highlighted the significance of looking at the child’s inner world and how this impacts upon decision making / identifying future placements, moving away from focusing upon behaviours exhibited and factual information. This will not only be relevant to step down from residential placements but also to placement moves in a general sense. The Circle of Understanding Model will be good tool to use in future.”

Child’s Social Worker

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“I have undertaken a lot of training courses since I applied to become a foster carer, but today’s training has given me an abundance of new understanding which I will take forward.”

Foster Carer

AFKA Cymru also delivers training on other courses for practitioners and caregivers which would complement the learning in this guide such as –

- Impact of Shame
- PACE
- Secure Base
- Blocked Trust / Blocked Care
- Improving Placement Stability for Children Looked After
- Matching to Foster Placements

Please visit our website - [Association for Fostering, Kinship and Adoption - AFKA Cymru](#) or contact us for more information – info@afkacymru.org



