

NI REGIONAL FOSTERING SERVICE

Statement of Purpose

WHO WE ARE

Action for Children is a UK-wide children's charity. We have been finding stable, loving homes for children who need them, for 150 years. The skills and experience we have gained during this time, have helped us become experts in finding the best possible match between children and foster carers. As we are smaller than many other fostering agencies, we can offer our foster carers high levels of training and support, and a friendly and personal touch. As a charity our commitment is to getting things right for children, not for shareholders.

WHAT WE DO IN NORTHERN IRELAND

We have been providing a dependable fostering service in Northern Ireland since 2006. During this time, we have developed a strong working relationship with all five Health and Social Care Trusts.

At the heart of Action for Children Fostering in Northern Ireland is the well-being of the fostered children and young people, the foster parents and families, our staff and colleagues. We are a family-centred service committed to providing safe and happy childhoods.

Achieving stability of relationships for the children in our care is our priority. We achieve this outcome in the following ways:

- We use attachment theory and principles. This, in combination with our knowledge of the impact of trauma on childhood development, allows us to support children, young people and foster parents to make a meaningful emotional connection. Our practice is informed by the PACE model developed by Dan Hughes and the Solihull Approach.

- We offer intensive support through experienced social workers with small caseloads. Our low turnover of staff promotes consistent and stable relationships between foster carers and fostering social workers.

This document sets out our service offer and the rationale underlying our pricing.

ASSESSMENT

To ensure the recruitment of skilled, committed and resilient foster carers, it is crucial that our assessment process is thorough and reflective.

We assess and approve our foster carers via our own Fostering Panel. Our Panel is Independently Chaired, with independent panel members and one agency social worker. Our current chair is Stephen Knox. Panel makes recommendations to our Agency Decision Maker, Stacey Burnett. Our Agency Decision Maker is a senior manager who sits outside the operational line management structure for fostering. This is a UK-wide role for all our fostering services which brings a specific benefit in terms of independent and consistent oversight allied to a culture of shared learning.

Our foster carers are reviewed every year by a manager who does not manage the foster carers' social worker and confirmed by the Agency Decision Maker. Every third year the foster carer's annual review is taken to Panel for consideration before being passed to the Agency Decision Maker. Foster carers will also be considered at Panel to make changes in approval, in relation to specific issues, to consider concerns about performance or standard of care, and to review resignations.

> **"Action for Children couldn't have matched me and my foster child any better. He's part of the family and has settled in so well."**
>
> **- Foster carer**

SUPPORT

The stability of our foster placements is founded on the comprehensive support package we offer our foster families.

We provide reliable 24 hour support to our foster carers.

All our placements are supported by an experienced fostering social worker who has received training in attachment, trauma and the PACE model and the Solihull Approach.

Alongside the monitoring and regulatory tasks which are an essential part of any fostering placement, our approach to fostering is based on relationship-based social work and promoting a sense of family in placements and in the service as a whole.

All our foster carers receive Thinking Therapeutically training which is regularly refreshed through our training schedule, support groups and supervision. In 2023 we delivered PACE training to all our foster carers.

Beyond the first year following approval we take a tailored approach to learning and development which addresses both the needs of the foster carer and the children living with them.

We have regular group and individual supervisions for social workers and managers with a Child and Adolescent Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist. This can include case specific consultation and direct consultation with foster carers and Trust social workers.

GOVERNANCE

Trusts deliver oversight of our placements and the quality of our service through the child's social worker, Looked After Children Reviews (which we and our foster carers attend), and regular monitoring meetings with the Head of Service for Fostering in each Trust. We regularly work in collaborative partnership with Trust colleagues to meet the needs of children and contribute to planning for the child.

As a large, well established, UK charity, Action for Children has robust governance policies and processes including practice, safeguarding, GDPR, finance, property, health and safety, and human resources. The Fostering Services Manager reports to a National Director for NI.

PLACEMENT TYPES

We deliberately recruit a diverse group of foster carers, with a range of skills and experience, from across Northern Ireland. This is because we know that the placement needs of Trusts do not remain static. We aim to help the wider system and children who are in care by adding capacity and options to a care system where demand will continue to outstrip supply. Access to a versatile pool of skills, experiences and backgrounds will help us find the best possible match to meet the needs of each child. Depending on the availability of foster carers we will offer the following types of placement:

- **Short term**
- **Long term**
- **Single child**
- **Siblings**
- **Children with disabilities**
- **0 – 18 age range**
- **Harder to place teenagers**
- **Placements requiring a higher level of support**
- **Specialist placements for older teens who may be on the edge of or leaving secure accommodation or custody**
- **Planned breaks**
- **Parent and child**
- **Emergency or short notice**

Like the Trusts we often have very limited additional capacity. This can lead to frustration for Trust social workers. We would encourage social workers to continue to contact us to discuss possible placements and we will continue to regularly provide Trusts with updates of availability. We will also identify potential carers that are close to approval to assist planning for children.

While the success of our service has come from planned and well-matched placements, we will discuss emergency or short notice placements. We have taken short notice placements in the past which have then become successful long-term placements, particularly when matching considerations have been part of an emergency placement process.

Many of our children choose to remain with their foster families after they turn 18. We manage payments to carers via the GEM Scheme and continue to provide support to our foster families – work for which we do not charge.

> **The children we have cared for would say the same thing – it is all about being family.**
>
> **- Foster carers**

PLACEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

To support principal placements, we take a 'team around the child' approach. It is essential that the child's social worker, the foster carer(s) and the fostering social worker operate as a core group around the child. At the beginning of a placement it is particularly important to clarify a range of areas - delegated authority, contact, education, therapeutic needs/plan, access to passports, pocket money and savings, parenting approach. Parenting as a team with shared, consistent approaches promotes stability and supports foster carers in their parenting role.

PLACEMENT CHARGES

1. Standard Rate

This will be the standard rate for placements and will be reviewed on an annual basis to take account of inflation and rises in other costs.

2. Intermediate Rate

This rate could be used as a rate for children with additional needs who require greater support and skill than Standard Rate placements but who do not present the risks and require the level of support and skill associated with Enhanced Placements.

The rate will be reviewed on an annual basis to take account of inflation and rises in other costs.

3. Enhanced Rate

This rate will be applied to placements where there is a high level of risk, where there is a need for high levels of support and/or where a high level of skill is required.

The rate will be reviewed on an annual basis to take account of inflation and rises in other costs.

4. Parent and Child Rate

This rate will be applied to Parent and Child Placements and will be reviewed on an annual basis to take account of inflation and rises in other costs.

5. Planned Breaks

In relation to planned breaks or what was called 'respite', we have moved away from a system that presumed the need for planned breaks in every placement. This has enabled us to keep the cost of placements down i.e. not needing to build the assumption of planned breaks into costing. It has also reflected our model of children being fully part of a foster family. It has led to negotiating the cost of planned breaks on a placement-by-placement basis, based on the needs of the carers and the child.

We have begun to expand our planned break offer. For some time, we have had planned break carers linked to our own placements and these have developed into alternative extended family arrangements that sustain and support placements. Given our success in recruiting planned break carers we have been able to offer planned breaks to Trust carers in a range of situations – one offs, regular arrangements, and summer breaks.

Our planned break rate is based on our standard rate and allows for the reduction in maintenance payments to foster carers in line with Model Scheme. There are two planned break rates. The first is where we are providing planned break support to a Trust foster family. The second is where we provide the planned break to an Action for Children foster family and has been discounted to take account of this being a more straightforward process.

Avery Bowser

Fostering Services Manager

Safe and happy childhood

Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

Action for Children
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fostercareni@actionforchildren.org.uk
028 9046 0500
actionforchildren.org.uk/fostering

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