

Becoming a Foster Carer with Milton Keynes Council

“Help them write their future”

1. Welcome

Thank you for making an enquiry to the fostering service in Milton Keynes. Becoming a Foster Carer is a huge decision, and one that you have probably been thinking about for a long time. We want to make sure that you have as much information as possible at this early stage so that you can make the decisions that are right for you. We are here to answer all of your questions.

This is the first step in a hugely rewarding career as a Foster Carer, where you will make a difference to children and young people's lives. Our Foster Carers ensure that children are supported and kept safe through what is often an extremely difficult time. There are few greater rewards than being able to provide those children who have often missed out on the things that most of us experience with a positive and secure childhood.

If you proceed with a fostering application you will go through an extensive assessment process over the next six months. This process is challenging and will look into your suitability to be a Foster Carer. We need to learn a lot about you to make sure you are a great match for the children we have in our care in Milton Keynes. It also helps us to understand what support you may need once approved as a Foster Carer.

As a Foster Carer you will encounter new situations every day. We are proud of the innovative support and training we offer to our Foster Carers so that they can provide the best possible care for foster children.

We hope that this pack provides you with information that will help you on your journey to becoming a Foster Carer. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you want to discuss anything further.

2. Why do children come into care?

Children come into foster care because they are unable to remain with their birth parents. This can be for a variety of reasons, including:

- Parental illness or mental health issues
- Parental drug or alcohol misuse
- Neglect or abuse
- Extreme family conflict
- Parents without support from family or friends who need help in an emergency

3. Why are Foster Carers needed?

Wherever we can, we try to keep families together. Where this is not possible we rely on Foster Carers to provide children with a safe, happy and supportive home so that they can enjoy a stable and secure life.

Living in a stable, loving family environment with Foster Carers is usually the best option for most looked after children. In the meantime, we work with their parents to address their issues. Most

children will return home once the family's problems have been resolved, however, for some permanent alternative care must be found. So, as well as people who can help with short-term placements, we also need families who can offer long-term foster care.

4. What do Foster Carers do?

As a Foster Carer, you will provide a loving and caring home for local children who cannot remain with their family. This means that you will look after a child in your own home but that child will usually remain the legal responsibility of either their birth parents or the local authority.

Leaving their family can be a traumatic experience for children, which means your support will be pivotal in helping them maintain a healthy and vibrant childhood. Children need stimulation, support and a secure environment to help them understand why they are living away from home. As a Milton Keynes Foster Carer, you'll have patience, resilience, compassion, empathy and an ability to communicate effectively with children and the professionals supporting you in being a Foster Carer. You will support foster children with their education, health and leisure needs and be given support from our Virtual School and Looked After Children's Health Team to do this.

Children living in Milton Keynes come from a wide range of backgrounds and Foster Carers should be prepared to support foster children in their cultural and religious beliefs. As part of your assessment we'll discuss both this and the age range of children that you feel would best fit into your family.

As a Foster Carer you will form professional relationships with social workers, teachers, health professionals, therapeutic services and parents and family members of the child in your care. We work together to ensure that information about our looked after children is shared, allowing their needs to be met as effectively as possible.

As part of your role as a Foster Carer you will keep written records of your foster placements, allowing us to monitor the kind of support needed by you and the children in your care.

Here are just some of the things you will be expected to do:

- Make decisions about the child's routine care and provide support and guidance regarding their education, health and social well being
- Attend some meetings, keep written records, manage information that is confidential and sensitive and help make plans for a child's future
- Some children can display difficult and challenging behaviour. You need to be able to recognise the possible causes of this (and with our support) develop strategies to help the child manage their feelings and actions
- Contact with their own families is very important to children in foster care. You will need to help promote this contact wherever possible
- Undertake learning and development activities to enhance your skills as you develop your career in fostering

5. Who can become a Foster Carer?

Fostering could be for you whatever your age (minimum age 21, no upper age limit), ethnicity or personal circumstances. If we can be confident that children placed in your care will be safe and well looked after, we will welcome your application. Foster Carers should be physically able to look after the children in their care.

You need time, patience, tolerance and energy. You must be able to share your home and life with others and there's no doubt that a sense of humour goes a long way!

As it is such a big commitment, we have found it best if other life changing events have settled down before you apply to foster. For instance, we would prefer it if you would wait for three to six months after fertility treatment before applying, or two years after the birth of a baby, or a suitable length of time following a family bereavement.

If you are working we will need to make sure you have sufficient flexibility with your time to meet the demands of fostering. By itself, working is not a reason for us to turn you away.

As a Foster Carer, you should:

- Enjoy spending time with children
- Be caring and considerate
- Respond to difficult situations calmly and thoughtfully
- Be able to talk openly and honestly
- Have a spare room
- Be able to drive or have easy access to daily transport

Types of Fostering

Short-Term Foster Care

Short-term Foster Carers look after children who have been taken into care at short notice. They stay until their family situation has been resolved, or until more suitable permanent care can be arranged for them. This period can range from a few days to a year or more.

Long-Term Foster Care

Long-term foster care means committing to look after a child for an extended period of time, usually up until they are 18 (or 21 under a Staying Put arrangement). Children in long-term foster care are carefully matched to prospective Foster Carers to ensure that their transition to foster care is as smooth as possible. Foster Carers should be willing to provide the commitment and support to this child until they reach adulthood.

Parent and Child Foster Care

Parent and Child fostering is when a Foster Carer welcomes a parent and child into their home and you would also support the parent with the practical and emotional care of their child, in most cases the child is under the age of one year old. The parent is supported by the Foster Carer to develop their parenting skills and ensure that the child is safely cared for. Foster Carers will need understanding, knowledge of child development, as well as the ability to create a positive and secure relationship between the parent and child.

Specialist Fostering (Potential Tier 3)

Specialist fostering has been introduced to support children and young people with challenging behaviours and complex needs. They may be out of school, have little routine in their lives and may feel rejected, unhappy or rebellious. These placements usually last for up to two years, during which time you will have access to training and support from a team of specialised professionals. Foster Carers will work to achieve positive change that enables the young person to move on to a long term foster placement, return home or live independently.

Supported Lodgings

Supported Lodgings is shared accommodation where you will provide a young person aged 16+ years with practical and emotional support with a view to increasing their confidence and readiness to move onto their own home. From the age of 16 some young people decide that they want to be

more independent than within a foster home, but they either lack confidence or the skills required for them to move into their own bedsit/hostel accommodation. Supported Lodgings offers them the opportunity to experience elements of independence within a supportive and encouraging environment.

Emergency Foster Care

Children can be removed from their family in an emergency because of a sudden change in circumstances. Emergency Foster Carers provide emergency care for children for a period of up to 72 hours until a longer term placement can be found.

Respite Foster Care

Respite foster care is set up to give parents and Foster Carers a break from the caring responsibilities of their child. This can last up to 21 days and will sometimes occur a few times a year. This can be to provide a break to a Foster Carer who is currently caring for a child or it can allow a struggling family some time to be assisted with support services so that children can return to a more supported and stable family environment.

Short Break Family Link

Short break foster care gives families who have a child with a disability a break from caring for their child. This can be a very positive experience for the child as they are able to form new, ongoing relationships with their short breaks carers who are linked to the family and can be involved in new experiences and activities with their foster family. This care can be varied including day care, overnight and weekend care on an agreed basis.

Who needs Fostering?

Babies and Toddlers

Babies and toddlers usually need short-term homes while they are at their most vulnerable. They may return to their birth family or live with you while they are waiting to be adopted.

Young Children aged 4-12

This is a crucial time in a child's life. They need stability and routine, as well as help settling into school and building friendships.

Teenagers

Teenagers need stability, as well as clear boundaries and advice. They need the space to learn and make mistakes as they prepare for independent living. You will play a significant part in their educational achievement, sharing in their success. Some teenagers wish for independence when they become 16 years old. This can be provided by Supported Lodgings Carers who are able to offer semi-independence. This type of fostering offers support to young people around life skills such as cooking and budgeting.

Sibling Groups

Where possible we try to keep brothers and sisters together. We therefore need Foster Carers who are able to look after siblings. We can offer additional support to help you with this.

Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities can be harder to place as they often will need specific care and more attention. Carers with a background of looking after children with similar needs is an advantage, but by no means a necessity.

How will we support you as a Foster Carer

Our Foster Carers are never expected to 'go it alone'. You will always be fully supported. We know this is vital to ensuring that fostering placements are successful and we offer a comprehensive support package.

Training

Good quality training is an essential element of our support. We offer a comprehensive package to enhance your knowledge and give you the skills you need to help children through difficult times.

Support from Social Workers

Once you are approved you will be allocated a dedicated supervising Social Worker. They will offer advice, practical support to help you feel confident about fostering and assist you in building your skills.

Out of Hours Support

If you need help at any time outside of office hours, our emergency duty team is only a call away. In addition, membership of the Fostering Network, which you are automatically given as a Foster Carer with Milton Keynes Council, entitles you to a quarterly magazine, free information booklets, legal advice and a 24 hour advice line.

Specialist Support

We will make sure you always have access to resources that are tailored to meet the specific needs of the child, or children, you care for.

Educational support is provided by a specialist team committed to improving the education of Milton Keynes looked after children. They will work with the child's school and arrange specific support where needed.

Our Children's Participation Officer also supports children in care, helping them take part in making decisions about their lives and ensuring they have their say.

Regular supervision

Milton Keynes are proud of the support we offer to our Foster Carers. Each Foster Carer is supported directly by a supervising Social Worker. You will regularly meet with your supervising Social Worker from the team who will also provide you with day-to-day support if you have any queries or issues. There is also a 24 hour support line where you can speak to a Social Worker who can support you with any immediate issues or concerns about the young person in your care.

Support Groups

There are a number of support groups where approved Foster Carers meet on a regular basis. These include a newly approved Foster Carer support group, coffee mornings, supported lodgings carers group and also children who foster.

Mentor

We will give you access to a fostering mentor. Mentors are experienced foster carers themselves and they will understand exactly the challenges you face because they will have experienced them directly themselves.

Training, Support and Development for Foster Carers

We provide an extensive array of training for our Foster Carers, ranging from Safeguarding and Understanding Risk, to Understanding Attachment and Preparing Young People for Independence. When you first start your new role as a Foster Carer you will be given a Training, Support and Development Standards workbook to complete within your first 12 months as a Foster Carer. The guide itself gives an interesting snapshot of what you can expect in your first year.

More information can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/guidance-for-foster-carers>

Professional Development

The development of our Foster Carers is extremely important to us. This is why we have introduced allowance levels that reflect the experience and training our Foster Carers have. Each Foster Carer has a Personal Development Plan, agreed with their supervising Social Worker, which allows you to access the variety of training that we offer. As a newly approved Foster Carer, you will usually begin on allowance Tier One, progressing to Tier Two once you have the requisite experience and have completed the necessary training. The allowances we pay comprise of a payment that covers the costs of having a child in your care and a professional fee that increases as you gain more experience and complete more training. We also provide allowances for a contribution towards the cost of taking looked after children away on holiday, birthdays and festive holidays.

National Minimum Standards

The National Minimum Standards for fostering services are designed to provide a basis for the minimum level of care Local Authorities and Foster Carers are obliged to provide for children in care. More information can be found at: www.minimumstandards.org.

The Fostering Journey

Application process

Enquiry

The first stage is to complete our online enquiry form. A member of the team will contact you to complete the initial enquiry to commence the fostering assessment process.

If we both agree to progress to the initial home visit, a visit will be arranged to your home to discuss fostering further.

Initial Home Visit

Our Fostering Recruitment Officer will meet you at home to discuss your ability to provide a nurturing environment for foster children. It is an excellent opportunity for you to ask any questions you have about fostering.

If you have a partner then it is essential you are both present at the meeting, even if you are going to be the main carer. It gives us the opportunity to learn more about you and your family. We do have a look around your home to confirm you have sufficient space for a child and it meets the needs of children in foster care. We do not expect a luxury home, but a clean, safe and comfortable environment where a child will thrive.

Registration of Interest and Statutory Checks

Following the initial home visit a decision will be made about whether to progress to the formal Registration of Interest stage. You will then complete an application form.

As part of your fostering assessment, you will complete a police Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) check, a medical check and other statutory checks. You will also be asked to provide personal references.

Skills to Care

This is the first training course on your journey to becoming a Foster Carer. It lasts for three days and covers issues and scenarios that you may encounter as a Foster Carer. "Skills to Care" is a great opportunity to meet other people on their foster care journey as well as to think about and develop strategies that you will use when looking after children and young people.

Form F Assessment

This is the most in-depth part of the fostering application process. A Social Worker will visit you at home about six to eight times to discuss all aspects of your family life, including your family history, education, employment, parenting skills and your motivation to be a Foster Carer. An assessment will be written up with all of this information which will be shared with you for your feedback.

Fostering & Permanence Panel

You and your assessing Social Worker will attend a Fostering Panel, made up of independent professionals with experience of foster care, who will have read and discussed your assessment report beforehand.

You and your Social Worker will answer questions that have arisen from the report. The Fostering Panel may seem daunting (your Social Worker will be there to support you). Panel's role is to get a full picture of your potential as a Foster Carer. The Panel will then recommend whether you are approved.

Approval

Following approval, you will meet with your new fostering supervising Social Worker who will be your first point of support as a Foster Carer. You will then be approached to identify a suitable match for children awaiting placement.

Your supervising Social Worker will ensure your continued development as a Foster Carer.

Eligibility – Frequently Asked Questions

The application process:

What kinds of checks are carried out on me and my home?

We carry out a number of checks as part of the assessment process which includes:

- checks with the Disclosure and Barring Service (previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau), checks with Local Authorities, Health Trusts, and social work services
- checks with the education department
- checks with the register listing those prevented from working with children
- a home safety check is carried out on your home
- a pet assessment (if needed)
- a medical assessment with your GP

We also ask for references from previous employers as well as personal references that cover the last ten years.

Will a police record stop me from fostering?

Not necessarily. The law states that the only criminal convictions that prevent people from fostering are those that relate to an offence against children or a sexual offence. Minor offences should not count against you in your application to foster; however, we make decisions on a case by case basis. All criminal convictions will need to be disclosed when you first apply as the process includes a detailed check with the Disclosure and Barring Service.

Can single people foster?

Yes. Anyone can apply to foster regardless of whether they are male or female, single, married or living with a partner. You can also foster regardless of whether you have your own children or not, whether you live in your own home or rent, whatever your race, religion or sexuality.

Is there a maximum or minimum age to start fostering?

There is a legal minimum age to become a Foster Carer in Milton Keynes, we need you to be over 21. This is so that Foster Carers will have sufficient life experience to enable them to meet the needs of the children placed with them.

There is no upper age limit for Foster Carers. Many older people make excellent carers, providing they are fit enough to look after a child. They bring a wealth of skills and experience to the role.

I'm moving house soon. Can I apply to foster before I move?

It is unlikely we would begin an assessment if you are planning to move in the next two years as your home is an important part of the assessment.

Can I foster if I have had previous social services involvement?

It depends on the extent of the involvement. This is something that can be discussed with our Fostering Recruitment Team.

Citizenship and community:

Do I have to be a British citizen in order to become a Foster Carer?

There is no requirement to be a British citizen in order to be a Foster Carer in Milton Keynes. Children from a wide range of backgrounds need Foster Families, so we need carers from all walks of life. You must be resident in the UK, with indefinite leave to remain.

Can I foster if I have only recently moved to the UK?

If you have recently moved we will look at your individual circumstances and you must also be able to provide a checkable history for the past ten years. If you are new to the UK, please speak to us about your circumstances before you apply.

Do you have to speak English to a high standard to be a Foster Carer?

A large number of children in foster care do not have English as a first language and being placed in a home where their first language is spoken can be very beneficial for them. You will need an adequate level of spoken and written English to be able to communicate with professionals, support children's education and to make notes and keep records. If you have any particular communication needs, we are more than willing to discuss this with you.

We are a religious family. Will this affect our application to foster?

It does not matter what your religion is and this should not affect your application. You might like to think about your approach in the event of looking after a child from a different background. How, for example, would you feel about discussing with them matters such as alternative religious belief? Or supporting them through issues of different sexuality? Would you feel able to abide by the council's policies on such issues?

Health matters:

I have suffered from depression in the past; will that prevent me from fostering?

Past mental illness is not a bar to becoming a Foster Carer, in fact there is no diagnosis that can automatically prevent you from fostering. However you would need to discuss this with us. A medical report will be sought

as part of the assessment process, and you would also need to consider the impact that the emotional side of fostering could have on your own mental health.

I'm overweight. Can I still foster?

Yes. But a health check from your doctor may be required.

I have heard that I can't become a Foster Carer because I smoke. Is that true?

You will not be able to foster children under five years of age, and we ask you not to smoke around any other age group. On its own, smoking does not bar you from fostering over 5 year olds in Milton Keynes. This also applies to vaping.

Money, tax and benefits:

This is for general guidance only. Depending on your individual circumstances you may need specialist advice. Please ask us for more information.

Do Foster Carers pay tax and national insurance?

Foster Carers are treated as self-employed for tax purposes. There is a simplified income tax scheme for Foster Carers, called 'qualifying care relief'. For further information please visit www.gov.uk and search 'qualifying care fund.'

I'm not doing it for the money, but will I be out of pocket?

No. Your fostering allowance covers the cost of food, clothing, personal care, travel etc. There are extra payments too for the child's birthday and festive presents, plus a holiday payment.

Can I foster if I have previously had financial problems?

Previous financial problems should not prevent you from fostering. You will need to be able to show that you are now financially secure enough to provide a stable home for children that are placed with you, and that you are able to manage the fostering allowances paid to you.

Housing:

I don't have a spare bedroom. Can I foster?

No. You must have a spare bedroom so the child you foster has the privacy and space they require. If you are short of space, you may wish to consider 'shared care'. Shared carers provide valuable regular respite to families with a disabled child. You could have a child with a disability to stay for a few hours or a day each week, giving their own family a break.

Can I foster if I don't own my home?

Yes. So long as you are financially secure it does not matter if you rent privately, through the council or own your home. You will need to obtain consent from your landlord.

Working:

Can I foster if I work full time?

The main carer will need to be available to attend a variety of meetings, regular contact sessions with birth family during the day as well as training. You will need to transport children to and from school during the day. We advise that the main carer works a maximum of 20 hours per week. The second carer can work full-time. Supported lodgings carers for young people aged over 16 years can both work full-time.

Potential placement of a child:

Will I have a say in who I foster?

As part of the assessment to become a Foster Carer, we will discuss with you the appropriate age range, the number of children you will be approved to foster and any other considerations. Ideally, all placements of children will be well-matched and planned.

How much will I know about the child before they are placed with me?

We discuss every potential placement with you as it is your decision whether or not to take that child into your home. We try to provide as much information as possible about a child, giving guidance where needed. Sometimes, we only have limited information to share often when it is an emergency placement.

General:

Can I foster if I'm a childminder?

In principle, yes, you can. It does depend on the age of the child you wish to foster and your Ofsted approval. We will also need to make sure that you can cope with the pressures and competing demands of child minding as well as looking after a foster child.

Can the child change schools and go to one closer to where I live?

Stability for foster children is very important so we try to avoid them having to change schools wherever possible. However, on occasions, it could be in the child's best interests to change school and this would need to be discussed with professionals beforehand.

Can I foster if I can't drive or don't have the use of a car?

Yes. However, you need to tell us how you propose to get a child to contact, school, medical appointments and fostering meetings by alternative transport. There is a high level of daily transport expected.

Who is responsible for taking the children to school and to the doctor etc?

We expect Foster Carers to undertake these day-to-day tasks. However, on the odd occasion that you have a problem, your supervising Social Worker will help you make alternative arrangements.

Relationships:

How will fostering affect my own children? Fostering involves the whole family and will undoubtedly affect your children. The children of Foster Carers play a key role in the fostering household and should be included at all stages of the fostering process. It can be tough for children who find themselves sharing their parents with children who have led very different lives. However, many children also say that they have enjoyed their experiences and learnt a lot from them.

Foster Carers say it is important that you continue to make time for your own children and ensure that they still feel they are special to you.

Will children I foster stay in contact with their birth families?

Most children will stay in contact with their birth families. This could be through regular contact sessions or in writing. Your Social Worker will talk to you about this. We have a legal duty to promote positive contact with birth families.

Will my relationship with my partner be assessed?

Yes. For prospective Foster Carers, we look to see that your relationship with your partner is stable. Both of you will need to understand the responsibilities of a fostering family even though only one of you may take on the main caring role.

What if we don't get on with a particular child?

It is inevitable that, as Foster Carers, there will be some children who are a better match for your family than others - some children will take longer to adjust to living in your home. If there are real difficulties with a child, then it is important to discuss this with your Social Worker. It may be that with extra support or training, caring for that child becomes easier and more enjoyable.

Fostering Allowances 2021-2022

Fostering a child is not volunteering – it is a profession and is rightly rewarded as such. We believe our financial allowances are sufficient for carers and looked after children to prosper. It is only one part of the support we offer. In addition to the weekly allowance, Milton Keynes' carers receive birthday and festive period payments to help cover these annual costs for the child in their care. They also receive an allowance to take the child in their care on an annual family holiday. Our carers are also entitled to two weeks' annual paid holiday too!

Fees:

Newly approved Foster Carers will be on Tier 1 fee rate until their first household review. Following the review and where there is evidence that the Foster Carer(s) have demonstrated completion of core training, their fee will be paid at Tier 2 fee and Foster Carers are also entitled to a maximum of two week's holiday allowance (see below):

Professional Fee:

Tier 1

Weekly Fee Per Child - £146.00

Two week holiday allowance - £292.00

Tier 2

Weekly Fee Per Child - £182.00

Two week holiday allowance - £364.00

Milton Keynes Council Fostering Allowances (2021-2022)

0-4 Age Range

Weekly allowance - £153.00

Birthday allowance per child – £78.00

Festival allowance per child – £78.00

Annual holiday per child - £300.00

Milage rate – 0.45p per mile

5-10 Age Range

Weekly allowance - £169.00

Birthday allowance per child – £96.00

Festival allowance per child – £96.00

Annual holiday per child - £300.00

Milage rate – 0.45p per mile

11-15 Age Range

Weekly allowance - £193.00

Birthday allowance per child – £119.00

Festival allowance per child – £119.00

Annual holiday per child - £300.00

Milage rate – 0.45p per mile

16-17 Age Range

Weekly allowance - £226.00

Birthday allowance per child – £153.00

Festival allowance per child – £153.00

Annual holiday per child - £300.00

Milage rate – 0.45p per mile

Staying Put and Supported Lodgings:

From the young person's 18th birthday they are no longer looked after and in care; therefore Foster Carer allowances and children looked after allowances no longer apply. In order to assist with preparing for independence, young people are expected to take responsibility for some parts of the allowances Foster Carers previously provided.

Scheme:	Supported Lodgings	Staying Put
Support from Carer:	£100.00	£100.00
Rent/Utilities:	£115.00	£115.00
Mileage rate:	0.45p per mile	0.45p per mile
Food:	£35.00	£35.00
Total:	£250.00	£250.00

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