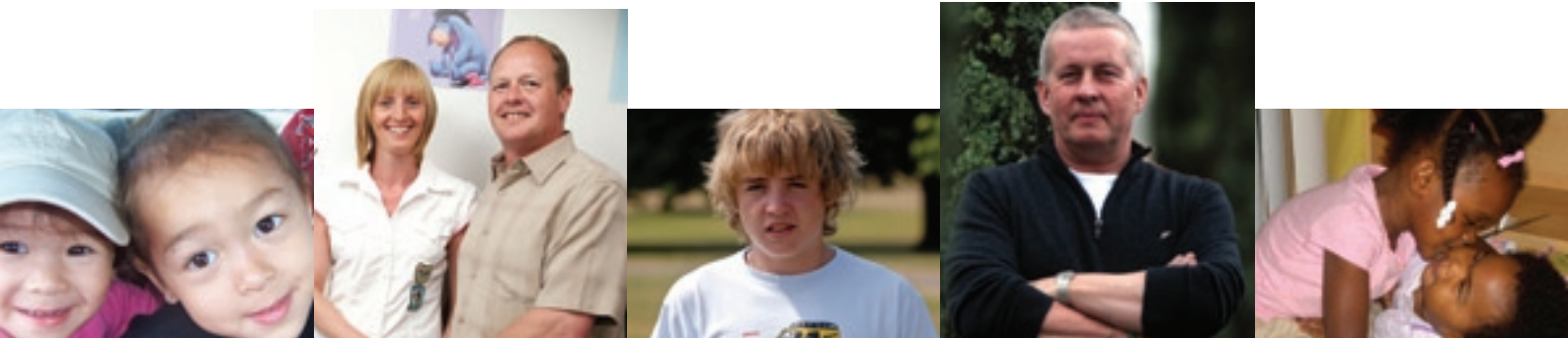


A free guide from Pathway Care



How to choose a Foster Care Agency



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What is an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)

Historically, the provision of foster services was wholly the responsibility of the Local Authority Social Services. IFA's came into being to help meet the increasing demand for fostering and to enrich the choice available. It is argued that their existence has in some instances, led to improved local council fostering services. Whether an independent fostering agency or a social services department they must adhere to the same set of Government standards.

Since the first independent foster care agency was founded in the 1990's, and the introduction of the Fostering Guidelines in 2002, independent foster care has grown to the point where it accounts for around 27 % of all foster placements i.e. 12,800 children. The balance is still with Local Authority foster carers. The government is committed to a "mixed economy" of foster care and the role of the IFA's will continue to grow.

The market comprises a small number of large national players some substantial regional players and a host of small local providers. Most independent providers are companies whilst a few are registered charities. Although not a national agency, Pathway Care is a top 5 provider.



Introduction

Foster carers come from all walks of life and all have different reasons for wanting to foster and have different personal aims and aspirations. It is essential therefore that anyone considering fostering should select the agency that is most suited to meeting their needs. Remember, not all independent fostering agencies are the same.

Simply check that the agency you are talking to feels able to welcome, guide and support you in a manner appropriate to your personal circumstances. Many people believe that you can only foster if you are part of a couple. This is not the case, as an agency we welcome and consider applications from people who are older, single, care leavers or those who have experienced disrupted family backgrounds themselves.

Sometimes people think they cannot foster if they are in rented accommodation. Carers should be welcomed whether in rented or owned accommodation (if in rented accommodation you simply need to get the landlords permission which is not usually withheld).

Becoming a foster carer is not a quick process and making the wrong choice initially is both frustrating and time wasting. If you have never been involved in fostering before, you are unlikely to know the questions to ask that will help you select the right agency for you.

We have tried to group the questions you should consider and ask about under headings that reflect the stages in the journey that you will go through to become a foster carer. We also include some of the questions you need to ask regarding what happens after you have become a foster carer as this is not often explained to you at the outset.

The purpose of this short guide is to help you make the choice of agency that is right for you.

We are always interested in feedback, so if you have any comments that you feel would be useful in helping us improve this guide please send them to; recruitment@pathwaycare.org.uk

Why do you want to foster?

Becoming a foster carer is a big decision; it impacts not only on your life but the lives of those for whom you will care as well as your family and friends.

Be clear in your own mind about why you want to foster and ensure that you have the support of those around you as it will impact on them and you will need their goodwill and support. Any good fostering organisation will spend time probing the reason for this important life choice so be prepared to discuss this in depth.



Who do you want to foster?

This is something anyone thinking of fostering should consider before setting out on the journey to becoming a foster carer.

Some people have very fixed ideas on the type of child or young person that they want to care for. e.g. sibling groups, children with disabilities or children within a specific age range. It is important therefore to ask how many referrals from local authorities the agency you are talking to would get for this type of placement. This would greatly affect the number of placements you are likely to be offered.

The more open minded you are about the types of children you are prepared to care for the more likely you are to be offered placements.

When you are going through the assessment process (covered later in this guide), you will probably realise that you have more relevant and useful skills than you first thought, and between you and your assessor, you arrive at the placements types that are most suited to your skills and household situation.



What type of organisation do you feel comfortable in?

Are you someone who needs to be a part of a small organisation or are you happier in a larger organisation with more resources? How ambitious are you? All these things have a bearing on whether or not you will feel comfortable working with a particular type of organisation.

The fostering sector is changing rapidly and the task of fostering is becoming more professional. Local Authorities are increasingly working with IFA's through framework agreements so you need to choose one that is likely to have the resources to secure a longer term future. You need to consider the larger regional or national organisations.

Larger does not necessarily mean impersonal. Pathway Care for example is one of the larger organisations but it is organised on a regional basis so foster carers have the benefit of being with an organisation that can successfully bid for fostering tenders, yet offers foster carer a very personal service that is delivered locally from their Regional Support Centres. Having a local resource is important for training and support groups.

The quality and proximity of support is vital to a foster carer (we deal with this in more detail later in the guide) but not all agencies provide support in the same way. Ask for specific details; don't be fobbed off with generalities!

Ask about agency size, the way it is organised and, most importantly, what is its record is in winning tenders. If the agency hasn't won a tender in the last 12 months they are unlikely to be able to offer you placements longer term.



The Initial Visit or Meeting

Once you have selected an agency or agencies to talk to, they will set up an initial meeting with you in your home. This may last around 2 hours. The person who attends that meeting can often determine your view of that agency.

In most circumstances it will be one of their social workers, whilst in other instances it will be a dedicated foster carer recruitment person (also a qualified social worker but specialising in the recruitment task).

Agencies with a dedicated recruitment person are usually more focused on getting the right people through the process efficiently so that they can start fostering that much sooner.

At the initial meeting, the agency should aim to paint a realistic picture of fostering. That picture should point out the challenges and rewards that fostering brings, it should also point out the pitfalls. If you do not feel that the agency has put forward a balanced view, that is not fair on you and you should think seriously about discarding that agency from your list.

They should ask that all members of the household are present at that meeting to gauge everyone's commitment to the idea of becoming a fostering household. If they don't ask that all household members are present, then you could find that the process of becoming a carer stalls or even worse you are disappointed at a later date when they determine that perhaps not all household members fully support the decision to foster and therefore do not progress your application.

If you (or any member of your household) have any form of criminal record declare it at the outset and ask if the agency will still consider you. Depending on the nature of the offence and if you can demonstrate that you have turned your life around, you may not necessarily be excluded. Many people who have turned their own life around make excellent foster carers

Ask if they can arrange for you to speak to some of their existing carers. Carers will tell you exactly what it is like and what sort of support they get from the agency and how good it is. If they are reluctant to do this, think again.



One of the key elements in the fostering task is enhancing the life chances of the child or young person. If you are going to foster, you want to do this with an agency that prides itself on delivering excellent outcomes for the children and young people under their care. Always ask to see their record on outcomes for children.

Before a Local Authority places a child or young person with a foster carer, the agency will have used its skills to match the child the foster carer, their skills and household situation. The rigour of this process is crucial if to a successful placement i.e. one which is stable and facilitates the delivery of good outcomes for the child or young person. Ask about the agency record on placement stability.

Becoming a foster carer should be a partnership between you and the agency so don't be afraid to ask questions about anything. Our recruitment team all subscribe to the view that there are no stupid questions when it comes to fostering. If the agency is reluctant to answer you on anything, then are they the one for you?

At the end of the initial meeting, the agency should check whether you are still interested in progressing, now or in the future. If you are, they will either be prepared to leave you an application form or go away and think about what they have seen and heard to determine whether or not they think you are suitable. Whatever they decide, you should expect the courtesy of a reply within 7 days.

If you need more time, no agency should put you under pressure to make a quick decision. Agree when would be appropriate for them to get in touch with you again. If you need any more information, or want to ask questions that you forgot to ask during the initial visit, then don't hesitate to call them back.

At the initial meeting you are normally quite excited and may forget to ask lots of the questions you intended to ask. Make a list of these and leave space to write in the answers. There is a lot to cover and you may not remember all the answers by the end of the session. By the time you have seen another agency it will be hard to remember who said what!

The Assessment Process

Ask what the assessment process involves and in particular, how long it takes. With some providers it can take over a year, a good agency usually aims for 6 months. (At Pathway Care, we only undertake comprehensive and rigorous assessments and aim to have these completed in 4 months).

If you and the agency decide to proceed, ask how long before you are put into the assessment process? Anything more than 2 weeks, ask yourself how efficient are this organisation. A busy foster carer needs to be supported by an efficient organisation.

You will be allocated a dedicated assessor. In many instances this assessor will become your supervising social worker once you have been approved as a foster carer.

You have to be very honest at the outset of this process. Whether you tell an outright lie or if you are simply economical with the truth, a good assessor will discover the truth. You will also be subject to a CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) check, health checks and references will be taken up from lots of people including employers, any birth children, even ex-spouses or partners if that is relevant to your situation.

At the end of the Assessment process you will need to attend a fostering panel who will have already read the report on you from the assessor. The panel's function is to consider the assessor's recommendation based on the assessor's report and any additional information presented by the applicants or assessor at panel on the day. The panel will then make a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker who makes the final decision on whether the applicant is approved.

Once you have been through fostering panel your approval will stipulate the ages and type of children you can foster. To go back and vary this approval can be time consuming and frustrating. This is why you should be opening minded about the type of children you are prepared to care for from the start of the process.



What happens once I am approved?

Once approved, the agency will allocate one of their Supervising Social Workers to work with you, they are there to provide support, supervision, provide guidance to you and progress your professional development. They will also ensure that your placement capacity is effectively managed. (The child or young person will have their own social worker who is provided by the Local Authority responsible for their care).

Your career as a foster carer only begins once you have your first placement. The key question here to ask any agency is how long on average does a newly approved carer have to wait for their first placement? They should be able to give you a precise answer. If they are evasive about this, it could mean that you may be waiting quite a while and that means no fostering allowances. This may be important to you, particularly if you have given up a job to do this work. Remember however, the more restrictive you have been in the types of children and young people you are prepared to care for, the longer you may have to wait for a suitable placement.

Getting your first placement is always a scary moment! Suddenly, fostering becomes a reality. At Pathway Care we recognise that this is a crucial moment for both the foster carer and the child or young person so we always make sure that your Supervising Social Worker is there to help things along. We do this, not just on your first placement but for every placement, irrespective of the hour of the day or night (yes - emergency placements can happen). The question to ask any agency that you are considering joining is what is their policy on this and does it actually happen?



Training

During the assessment process you will go on what Pathway Care calls a “Preparation to Foster” course. It is an introduction to fostering and it serves as an opportunity for both parties to get to know and understand each other better and for you to get a better insight to the fostering task.

Post assessment you will be required to attend training on a variety of topics. At Pathway Care for example we have a 14 module programme that is constantly being updated in the light of new legislation, latest techniques etc. Ask what the training commitment is and where it is usually held.

Good quality training gives you the knowledge and confidence to handle a wide range of situations. All foster carers have to be trained to a minimum standard. In England all foster carers are required to obtain CWDC standard and Wales has its own equivalent standard. Ask what the agency does to support you in obtaining this qualification and how long they would expect it to take.

Training over and above the minimum standard means you should be better able to help deliver excellent outcomes for the child or young person in your care. Ask what other training opportunities exist. For example at Pathway Care we will support our carers to obtain NVQ3 in Child Care if they are keen to progress and take on bigger challenges.

If you have a desire to help children with more complex needs or disabilities for example, ask what opportunities exist for you to get the knowledge and skills to help you care for these children with confidence.



Support

All agencies will say their support is fantastic. In reality what does this mean? Support is about you being given the tools to be a skilful and confident carer. It is about being in touch with you on a regular basis, both by phone and visits to your home to discuss any concerns, having the ability to enlist extra support if necessary, having an emergency helpline service that really is there when you need it.

All agencies will claim to deliver 24 hour support, seven days a week, 365 days per year. In extreme circumstance are they able to get support out to you quickly? Some agencies operate their support service in what we would regard as an arms length way. You need to be confident that they are able to deliver what they say they can deliver.

Ask, how local is that support. At Pathway Care we operate a 3 tier system locally. Where circumstances demand, a carer can access a local duty officer, a senior social worker or the Regional Director depending on the nature of the emergency.

When you speak to other foster carers from any agency, ask them what the support really looks like on the ground.

Support can also include Carer Support Groups, where the agency facilitates groups of carers to get together to share experiences and offer mutual support. Ask how frequent are these, how are they organised and what the agenda usually covers. Properly organised and run, these groups can be an invaluable resource for a carer. If not they quickly become poorly attended and a waste of time.

Some agencies will also run specialist support groups focused for example on Men who Foster and Children who Foster (This group is for the birth children of foster carers who also have a part to play in the fostering task). At Pathway Care, we see support groups as invaluable and they are a great forum for allowing us to understand what issues currently concern foster carers, enabling us to react appropriately.

Most agencies will also have a calendar of social events for foster carers and the looked after children.



Choices

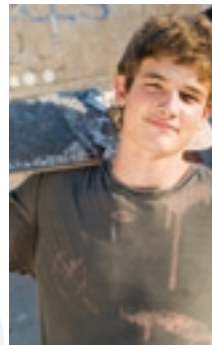
We hope that you have found this short guide useful and that it has given you a better insight on how to evaluate whether an agency meets your needs. Regardless of whether you choose to foster with Pathway Care or another agency, we would like to thank you for becoming a foster carer and helping the most vulnerable children in our society. We value all foster carers, you are special people.



If you are in any doubt about your decision to become a foster carer, we leave you with a few quotes from young people who are in care with some of our foster families;



“Keep the memories alive and safe because you can’t change the past but you can change the future. To my foster carers - these past 11 years of my life have been the greatest. I don’t know how to thank you enough and I love you”



“When you tell people you are in foster care they feel sorry for you but it doesn’t really bother us, because how many children can say that they are in foster care and having such a good life”.

“I am now studying at college and my foster carers are there pushing me, making sure that I have a good career and a healthy life ahead of me. Stick with the children and most of the time it works out good for the foster carer and the child”



“Our foster carers have given us experiences we could only have dreamt of, but most of all they have given us boundaries. They have tried very hard to make sure we have confidence in ourselves and feel good about ourselves”.



If you wish to enquire further about fostering with Pathway Care, please call 0871 226 3760.



Thinking about fostering with Pathway Care? Please call 0871 226 3760.

Regional Support Centres

South West England Region

Bristol Office Tel: 0117 957 3533
Pathway Care (Bristol) Limited Fax: 0117 957 3573
Church Court, North View, Soundwell Road Email: mail@pathwaycarebristol.org.uk
Bristol. BS16 4NQ Web: www.pathwaycare.com

Newton Abbot Office Tel: 01626 333787
Pathway Care, Second Floor Fax: 01626 333788
Manor Buildings, Brunel Road Email: mail@pathwaycaresouthwest.org.uk
Newton Abbot. TQ12 4PF Web: www.pathwaycare.com

Midlands Region

Bromsgrove Office Tel: 01527 834934
Pathway Care (Midlands) Ltd, Bartleet House Fax: 01527 889980
165a Birmingham Road, Bromsgrove Email: mail@pathwaycaremidlands.org.uk
Worcestershire. B61 0DJ Web: www.pathwaycare.com

East England Region

Oundle Office Tel: 01832 274715
Pathway Care, The Wharf House Fax: 01832 273352
Station Road, Oundle, Peterborough Email: mail@pathwaycareeast.org.uk
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