

# Foster Carer's Handbook



fostering  
with somerset county council



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## **Introduction**

Thank you for choosing to foster for Somerset County Council. This handbook is intended to give you an overview of the fostering role.

Not every situation you will encounter will be covered in this handbook, and your supervising social worker and the child's social worker will work with you to help you meet the needs of the child you are caring for.

In Somerset, we are committed to providing the best possible service to our children we look after by supporting them to live in foster families. Our vision is for children to be safe, healthy, happy and ambitious for their future and to develop skills for life. We want them to grow up in loving families and caring communities.

It is not always easy to look after children, particularly those who have had serious difficulties in their lives. We want to make sure that our foster carers are given good quality training and learning opportunities, supervision, support and guidance and that everyone is able to work well together to achieve the best outcomes for children and their families.

Foster care plays a vital part in so many children's lives. The unique role of foster carers is valued and the hard work and dedication required is recognised and appreciated. Thank you for the part you play in this.

## **Somerset Fostering Service**

## Foster Carer's Responsibilities

Somerset County Council has entered into a mutual agreement with our foster carers (The Foster Carer's Charter – see link below) which details what everyone agrees to do and provide to ensure that the children and families we work with receive the best possible service. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foster-carers-charter>

When you become a foster carer you will be asked to sign a Foster Carer's Agreement which sets out general expectations and responsibilities. You are expected to care for a child as a member of your family as if they were your own. This means including children in family holidays and activities and taking children to school, clubs and encouraging their friendships and family contacts.

<https://www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FC-Agreement-Final-2016.pdf>

The Fostering Service is regulated by The Fostering Service Regulations and National Minimum Standards 2011. The service, including foster carers, must comply with the National Minimum Standards. The values statement below explains the important principles which underpin the Fostering Standards.

- The child's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of their care.
- Children should have an enjoyable childhood, benefiting from excellent parenting and education, enjoying a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills leading to a successful adult life.
- Children are entitled to grow up in a loving environment that can meet their developmental needs.
- Every child should have his or her wishes and feelings listened to and taken into account.
- Each child should be valued as an individual and given personalised support in line with their individual needs and background in order to develop their identity, self-confidence and self-worth.
- The particular needs of disabled children and children with complex needs will be fully recognised and taken into account
- The significance of contact for looked after children, and of maintaining relationships with birth parents and the wider family, including siblings, half-siblings and grandparents, is recognised, as is the foster carer's role in this.
- Children in foster care deserve to be treated as a good parent would treat their own children and to have the opportunity for as full an experience of family life and childhood as possible, without unnecessary restrictions.

- The central importance of the child's relationship with their foster carer should be acknowledged and foster carers should be recognised as core members of the team working with the child.
- Foster carers have a right to full information about the child.
- It is essential that foster carers receive relevant support services and development opportunities in order to provide the best care for children.
- Genuine partnership between all those involved in fostering children is essential for the NMS to deliver the best outcomes for children; this includes the Government, local government, other statutory agencies, fostering service providers and foster carers.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-services-national-minimum-standards>

## **DBS**

We require that all adults living in a fostering household have DBS checks every 3 years to identify whether they have any offences which may pose a risk to children. Only specific offences will affect your ability to foster. If you have past offences you will need to discuss these with your assessing social worker as part of your fostering assessment so that a manager can make a decision about how the offences may impact on fostering.

If you or a member of your household, whilst fostering, are arrested, charged or convicted of an offence you must inform your supervising social worker so that a manager can make a decision about how the offences may relate to fostering.

## **Health and Safety**

Each fostering household will have a Household Inspection (Health and Safety Assessment) as part of their initial approval, this will be updated every year and a full assessment will be undertaken every three years. Children you care for are initially unfamiliar with your home and may not be aware of potential hazards. All children should be made aware of the escape plan should there be an incident such as a fire in the home.

## **Medical Fitness**

Each foster carer has a full medical as part of their assessment and then medical updates are requested from your GP every 3 years. If you develop any condition or illness which may affect your ability to foster you must inform your supervising social worker. We will then discuss with you what support you may need to enable you, where possible, to continue to foster.

## The Fostering Task

One of the greatest responsibilities any person can take on is the care of someone else's child. As foster carers you are expected to provide a very high standard of care and understanding to every child who comes to live with you.

Many of the children who are placed with foster carers will have experienced serious difficulties in their lives and consequently, both they and their families may test the patience of carers. Working with Children's Social Care and other agencies involved with the child can be stressful and frustrating at times for carers. There may be decisions made about a child that you would not make for your own and we would encourage you to discuss this tension with your supervising social worker.

Your supervising social worker's role is to supervise the care you give, support you to manage stress and develop as a carer. Others in your support network, such as family and friends will be important for you to talk to also, although in these relationships you will need to consider the confidentiality of the child you are looking after.

Children (particularly those who have had a disruptive and unhappy time) often find it hard to "fit in" with another family. Regardless of their home circumstances and experience, many of them would prefer to be living with their own families and at times will make this very clear in ways that can feel hurtful to you as a carer. As a carer you'll need to develop strategies for yourself to "not take personally" what can sometimes feel like very rejecting behaviour. Children in our care have had a tough time and most often will feel loyal to their own family, and we should not expect children we look after to be "grateful" or "lucky" to be looked after by us.

Some young people and children have experienced repeated moves from home to home for a variety of reasons; these may have been both planned and unexpected. These moves can often be interpreted by the young person as rejection, resulting in them having very low self-esteem and little or no self-confidence. This can make it difficult for them to be cared for by you, placing increasing stress on the whole foster family.

A young person who has been neglected, hurt or rejected may equally reject efforts to make good relationships, and it will often take time for trust to be built. In the meantime, there can sometimes seem to be an impenetrable barrier between carer and child or sometimes a child can need disproportionate amounts of your attention in order to feel safe. Patience can be stretched to the limit but time, consistency and commitment often win through. You will be offered training about how to manage some of the attachment difficulties and behaviours children have.

Children will react in different ways when they first arrive in a foster home. A child may be quiet or subdued, rude or aggressive. Some children may behave as though they have known you all their lives and be overly affectionate, compliant and eager to please. Almost all children will, whatever their presentation, be anxious and scared. Children need a welcoming, warm environment and some knowledge of what happens in your household.



There will be times when fostering will be very stressful and if you feel stressed it is important to share this with your supervising social worker. Seeking support is not a sign of weakness but is a strength as it shows that you are aware of your potential limits. Support is available and should be used.

## **Your Own Children**

It is essential to have the support of your whole family in pursuing a career as a foster carer. This means ensuring that your own children (and family) know what to expect, what is likely to change in the pattern of family life and what issues might occur at home or at school. Your own children need to be aware of what is expected of them in their relationship with a foster child. You will need to remain aware and alert to how your own children are feeling and ensure that they have space and time to talk with you honestly about any difficulties or resentments they may have.

Although many children find fostering rewarding, it can also be difficult for them and may make them feel different from their friends.

We have a support group (We Care 2) for the children of foster carers, where children who foster are encouraged through trips and activities to share their experiences and form friendships with other children who foster.

You may have your own children who when they become an adult may be considered suitable to support you in your fostering task. This should be discussed with your supervising social worker.

## **The Fostering Allowance and Fees**

Foster Carers receive a weekly allowance for each child they foster which covers the living costs of caring for a child, including the cost of food, additional utility costs, clothes, school uniform, school trips, leisure activities, family outings and holidays. For Christmas and in the week of a child's birthday 2 weeks allowance is paid to enable carers to buy presents and organise parties etc.

An enhanced allowance is paid over the summer holidays as recognition of additional costs of holidays and outings. The costs of transport for family events and trips are met through the allowance. Any additional transport costs specific to the child such as driving a child to school, contact or a medical appointment can be claimed by carers separately.

The Local Authority will consider one school trip per year and the contribution towards this will be sought from the Child Looked After (CLA) Team.

Somerset foster carers are also paid a fee which is a payment to the carer. The level of the fee varies in relation to your experience, training, additional tasks and type of fostering that you do. Your supervising social worker will explain how you can progress if you wish through the fee structure.

Below is the link for the Fees and Allowances Schedule:

<https://www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk/resources/downloads/>

## Insurance

As a foster carer, you will need to make sure that your house, contents and car insurance providers are aware that you foster and discuss with them the type of fostering that you do. They will be able to help you determine which changes of household circumstances you will need to continue to inform them about. Check with them what is covered in the policy in relation to your role as a foster carer.

If your home, car or contents are damaged through your role as a foster carer we would expect you to claim through your insurance company as you would for any other claim. Let your supervising social worker and the child's social worker know what has happened and the progress of your claim and keep any documentation in relation to the damage and the claim.

If your insurance company reject your claim, please let us know and we may be able to provide you with guidance or support through our own insurance services.

If you believe that the damage has occurred through the Council's negligence then you are fully entitled to put a public liability claim in against the Council. The matter will be fully investigated and either liability accepted and the claim will be paid or liability will be denied and a detailed explanation will be supplied.

If you wish to put in a claim against the Council please contact the insurance team on [insurance@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:insurance@somerset.gov.uk).

## Clothing

Your Fostering Allowance payment covers the cost of clothing on an ongoing basis, including school uniform and school equipment. Your supervising social worker will provide you with a list of minimum clothing that each child should have. If a child arrives with you with very limited clothing you will need to discuss this with the child's social worker and your supervising social worker, where in exceptional circumstances an emergency payment may be made.

Children Looked After have told us that it's really important to their sense of value to feel that they have similar trendy clothing to birth children and their friends. Carers need to be aware with teenagers of the need to provide some more expensive and trendy items.

## Equipment

Equipment needed for fostering babies and young children such as a cot or a car seat will be provided by the Fostering Service. You will be expected to provide age appropriate toys and activities for children in your care. Special toys and sometimes bedding should move with children and can help a positive transition to their new home.

## **Your Support and Supervision**

### **Supervision Visits**

Your supervising social worker will visit you at least monthly to supervise and support you. They will also make telephone contact with you in between visits. Very occasionally a lesser frequency is agreed for permanent, settled placements.

Supervision should include discussing the needs of the child placed, the impact on you and your family and methods of managing behaviour and stress. Additionally, there will be practical issues to discuss such as health and dental appointments, and whether you have all the equipment you need. It is important you share any worries or stresses with your supervising social worker as soon as you start to have them so that any support that would help can be arranged.

Your supervision will also include discussion about your development and training and learning opportunities available. Your supervising social worker will record these supervisions and you will be given a copy.

Records about your role as foster carers are kept by Children's Social Care in an electronic file. You have a statutory right to look at the records held about you.

### **Unannounced Visits**

Both the child's social worker and your supervising social worker have a legal duty to visit you unannounced at least annually.

### **Foster Carer Reviews and Foster Panel**

A review must take place at least annually for all foster carers. Additional reviews will be held if you have had a change of circumstances, wish to change your range of approval or if there have been any significant concerns.

Reviews are an opportunity for sharing views about your experiences and the service you are both giving and receiving. Your views and your own children's opinions will also be sought and recorded for the review, along with the views of the child in placement, the child's social worker and parents. Any proposed changes to your approval details will be considered at this time.

Your supervising social worker will write a review report which they will share with you before the meeting. Your review discussion will then be chaired by an independent person.

The first review after approval is presented to the local Fostering Panel. Subsequent reviews do not need to be presented to panel unless they are considering significant changes to your approval, there are significant concerns about your practice or following an investigation into an allegation. You are invited to attend any Panel meeting involving you.

## Support Services

Somerset County Council recognises the need for all foster carers to receive ongoing support and training. Fostering is a demanding task and carers need continuing help to develop their skills. When new carers are initially assessed they are given contact details of existing experienced carers who are happy to be contacted for support and guidance. They will also be given details of foster care support groups; these groups provide opportunities to meet with other carers to share skills, experiences and common problems. Foster carers get a great deal of support from each other through these formal and informal networks.

Your supervising social worker and their team is your first point of contact in the service to discuss worries or difficulties you may have. Each Fostering Team has a duty system which means you can speak to a supervising social worker during office hours if your allocated social worker is unavailable.

Outside office hours we have a Fostering Support Telephone Duty System available until 11pm in the evenings and on Saturdays and Sundays, where you can seek advice from a fostering social worker. You should receive details of how and when to access this service if required from your supervising social worker.

The Emergency Duty Team is also available to foster carers outside office hours for emergency situations such as a missing child.

Somerset foster carers are provided with individual carer membership to Foster Talk, which is independent from Somerset County Council. This membership gives you and your household access to free advice and support on areas of fostering including education, tax and legal advice. You will receive information about these services directly from Foster Talk. If you do not please raise this with your supervising social worker

Carers are also able to access Somerset County Council's confidential counselling service Care First. You will be given details of this by your supervising social worker.

## Training

Your supervising social worker can provide details about training and other learning opportunities, including the annual training programme which is accessible to all foster carers and details the courses which you are eligible to attend. There is no charge for foster carers attending any of the training, with travelling expenses to and from the training venue being paid along with a small financial contribution for attending.

When you first become a foster carer, you are required to complete the Department for Education (DfE) Fostering Induction Standards. These standards have been introduced as the minimum requirement that foster carers should have in order to care for a child or young person who is looked after.

You have to complete the standards within your first year of approval and you will be supported to do this by your supervising social worker and an experienced foster carer if you would like a mentor.

There is a small financial incentive for completing these standards which is paid on completion. Your supervising social worker will process this for you.

After training the whole of the workforce, including foster carers, receive a certificate of attendance, certification and learning log. This is to show your attendance at training but also for you to formally record what you learnt and how you will put it into practice. You should discuss your learning logs with your supervising social worker at each of your monthly supervision sessions and keep them in a portfolio of learning and development.

There is an annual training booklet available from your supervising social worker or you can access the Children & Families: Learning & Development website:

<http://extranet.somerset.gov.uk/children-and-families-learning-and-development/>

There are E-Learning modules available through the Learning Centre which is part of the Corporate Training department. The E-Learning modules available and how to access them are included in the training booklet and on the website. The link to The Learning Centre is <https://somerset.learningpool.com/login/index.php>.

Some training is considered vital to the fostering task and therefore is mandatory; other training may help you in relation to specific circumstances. All carers are expected to undertake regular training, and training will be discussed at carer's reviews and recorded on your Personal Development Plan. Training will also be discussed with you regularly in supervision.

## **Somerset's Foster Carer's Association (SFCA)**

*Run by Foster Carers for Foster Carers*

The Somerset Foster Carer's Association was launched in September 2015 and has a committee group that will develop the association, plan events and develop support services.

The SFCA aims to bring foster carers in Somerset together, providing them with a stronger voice that could influence and develop support services in the county. Carers will benefit by having opportunities to come together, sharing ideas and social networking that will develop the service for them and children in their care. The aim is to enhance support and guidance offered to foster carers in Somerset by increasing mentoring or buddy schemes, social events and fun activities that will be supported by fundraising activities.

## **Consultative Group**

Carers have a right to representation through the Foster Carer's Consultative Group, which regularly meets with senior managers from Children's Social Care. Contact your supervising social worker for the name of your local representatives and let your supervising social worker know if you are interested in representing other carers on this body.

## Support Groups

There are local carer's support groups, and your supervising social worker can give you details of whom to contact. Details of the groups are also circulated regularly in the countywide newsletter.

## Looking After a Child

### Planning a foster placement

We want all placements to be successful and meet the needs of the child. Therefore it is very important to plan placements as carefully as possible to ensure that you are aware of all that you need to know about a child.

To prepare a child to come and live with you they need to know about you. We expect carers to provide a child-friendly profile to help the child begin to understand your family and this work should start as part of your fostering assessment. Your supervising social worker will help you with this. Before the child comes to live with you, the child should have an opportunity to meet you and visit your home. On a rare occasion this may not be possible due to it being an emergency situation.

Whenever possible and safe we try to place children geographically as close as possible to their family home and community. It is important in terms of stability, continuity and sense of identity for them to maintain contact with family, school and friends.

It is the responsibility of the child's social worker to discuss particular child protection or safeguarding issues with you. Your supervising social worker will also update your safe care plan to take into account any particular needs of a child.

When a child is placed, the social worker should provide you with the following:

- Placement Information Record which should provide you with all the essential information you need to care for the child.
- A copy of any Court Orders relevant to the child.
- Risk Assessment
- Care Plan
- Placement Agreement
- Copy of a recent Assessment which gives an understanding of the child's history and needs.
- A record of the Delegated Authority agreed with you and the birth parents so that you know what decisions you can make on your own for the child.

It is the main carers responsibility to ensure that for any planned breaks away from the placement, the alternative carer has enough information and contact details to be able to care for the child safely.

## Placement Planning Meeting

A Placement Planning Meeting must take place prior to placement or within the first 5 days of any placement. This meeting is attended by you, your supervising social worker, the child's social worker and where possible the child's parents. This will usually take place within your home. This meeting should ensure how information is shared and agree how you are able to meet the child's needs and what support and help you might need to do so. Any additional support necessary because of particular challenges or needs (such as any alternative care (respite), transport, and particular equipment for example) should be discussed and agreed at this meeting. The meeting will focus on the child's needs and any additional support will need to have a role in meeting their needs and not be contrary to them. The rule of thumb social workers and carers should apply to any arrangements made for a child in our care is "would this be good enough for my child?"

Your supervising social worker will usually chair the Placement Planning Meeting. They will check with that all documentation is in place with the child's social worker and that it has been brought to the meeting. If there is any information outstanding how and when this will be provided to you will be agreed.

You will be given a brief outline of the child's history, any previous placements and what has been learnt and what the aims of the placement are, with timescales.

There will be a specific discussion around contact arrangements with family and friends, in particular frequency, transport and supervision.

Finally, it is important to confirm:

- Arrangements for introductions;
- Tasks to be done and by whom;
- Timescales the tasks need to be completed by;
- Visiting frequency;
- Date of the Child Looked After Review;
- Who else needs to know about the placement;
- Arrangements for education;
- Clarification of roles;
- Delegated Authority.

## Placement Support Meeting

A Placement Support meeting can be held at any time and may be especially useful during a transition time, to plan the support that may be needed in the future.

Sometimes you, your family or the child may be struggling with fostering/being fostered and you or the child may need some support. If you are feeling stressed or finding things difficult, raise this with your supervising social worker and they will organise a meeting with you and the child's social worker to discuss how we can support you better.

A Placement Support meeting must be held if a carer wants to give notice that they wish a placement to end, to review the support offered to you.

## **Keeping Records**

As the person most involved in the child's day-to-day life, your observations and experiences of the child are really important to inform the planning undertaken by the other professionals involved. Consequently, the keeping and sharing of records is really important. Discuss with your supervising social worker and the child's social worker how you plan to record and share information.

Carers are able to email records to the child's social worker and their supervising social worker through a secure email facility. Usually this is expected on a weekly basis and more frequently if you are a carer on a specialist scheme. Remember to record positive days as well as recording any difficulties, so that your recording reflects the child in a balanced way.

Information you give to Children's Social Care about a child or family which is placed on the case file is accessible to the person it relates to. You may therefore wish to check what is being recorded when you provide such information and it is also important for you to think about how you record information and how this may be received.

## **Children's Looked after Review Meetings**

Each child in our care has regular Child Looked After meetings to review the progress of their care plan. These are chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).

The first meeting is held within 20 days of the start of the child's placement, the second within 4 months of the start of the placement and subsequent reviews are held at least 6 monthly (3 monthly for children under 5). You will be involved in these meetings (they are often held in your home) and expected to provide a written report. These meetings should make sure that there is a Permanence Plan in place for the child, which details all of the options being explored for the child's future.

## **Visit from childcare Social Workers**

All children Looked After should have an allocated social worker who is based at the office in the area where the child lived originally. Their job is to keep in touch with the child, their family and you and to make sure care plans and review decisions are carried out and ensure that appropriate permanent outcomes are achieved as quickly as possible for the child.

A child's social worker should regularly visit your home to see how the child is getting on. They must visit within the first week of the placement, and then at regular intervals thereafter (at a minimum of every four weeks during the first year). If a social worker doesn't visit, then you should discuss this either with your supervising social worker, the child's social worker or their manager. The social worker will want to talk to the child on their own and will also need to see the child's bedroom from time to time.



## Contact with Family and Friends

Keeping in touch with parents or relatives is important in order for a child to retain relationships and a sense of their roots and origins. Foster children often have a love for and loyalty to their parents, even if they never see them or have been abused by them.

## The Benefits of Contact

For the child, contact may help ease their sense of loss, maintain relationships with, and provide reassurance about the wellbeing of birth relatives and other people important to them. Contact may help provide an opportunity for the child to gain more knowledge and understanding about their personal and family history, to accept their past, make sense of relationships and maintain their identity.

For carers, contact may help you improve your understanding of the child's birth family and their experiences and support you to give the child positive emotional support and help them develop a positive sense of identity.

The benefits of contact are not always obvious and the child's behaviour can sometimes seem more difficult around times of contact. They may need additional support from you to manage this.

Contact arrangements may need to change over time according to the needs of the child and the circumstances of the birth relatives and this should be detailed in the Child's Plan.

## Managing Contact

The frequency, timing and location of contact visits should be discussed at placement planning meetings and agreed by everybody concerned. Whilst it is essential that you pro-actively encourage contact you need to make sure that any arrangements agreed are "doable" and sustainable. It helps to make good links if you can with a child or young person's family. Children need to sense that you feel that their family and contact is a positive thing for them. Remember that in most cases children being looked after will eventually return to live with their birth family as older children or adults.

You can help both the child and the parents by:

- Talking to the parents about the child, especially the good things that have happened;
- Being honest and straightforward;
- Not being judgemental - the facts about what has happened in the family can often be different from the way they at first appear;
- Helping the child maintain a positive but realistic view of their family.

There is often hurt and misunderstanding on both the parent's and child's side about what has happened in the past. There may also be guilt. The carer should recognise,

however, that most children really do want contact with their parent or parents, even if they can't openly state it.

Parents can feel very strongly about certain issues. Sometimes they will criticise your approach, possibly as a way of compensating for a sense of guilt or a feeling of having failed or been unfairly treated. Common areas of conflict can include hairstyles, pocket money, clothes and bedtimes. How to manage these matters should be discussed and agreed at the Placement Planning Meeting and set out in the Delegated Authority Agreement. Parental involvement in delegating authority is often the best way to resolve potential areas of conflict. Your supervising social worker and the child's social worker should support you in this.

There is also the potential for carers to be drawn into conflicts between the parents and the Local Authority. Foster carers need to be mindful of this and be careful to keep the relationship with birth family friendly but professional. Non-connected carers should not include parents as friends on Social Media, for example, as this would in most cases cross a boundary of professionalism. Again, the use of supervision will be helpful to you in reflecting on getting the balance right.

## Education

We are committed to providing a programme of full-time education for all children who are looked after. The Virtual School, led by the Virtual Headteacher has a specific responsibility to ensure that the educational provision for children and young people in care is both adequate and meets statutory requirements. Please send requests for advice and enquiries to [thevirtualschool@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:thevirtualschool@somerset.gov.uk)

If the child you are caring for is out of school without permission, you should contact the child's social worker or your supervising social worker immediately.

Wherever possible foster children should continue at the same school they were previously attending. In most cases this is far less disruptive for them and will support them to achieve to their potential and provide some stability and maintain relationships that have already been formed. If there does have to be a change of school, there will need to be discussions between you, the social worker, the child, their parents and the Virtual School before it can be agreed.

As foster children are effectively members of your family, responsibility for attendance, visits to the school, checking the child's progress and discussions with teachers are all likely to be undertaken by you, although it is likely that the parents will continue to have contact with school too. The social worker will also visit the school from time to time.

It is important to establish who is the person in the school who knows your foster child best. This can be more difficult in a large secondary school. Each school is required to identify an individual teacher who will have special responsibility for any pupil who is being looked after by the Local Authority. This Designated Teacher should be able to help if normal communication links prove problematic.

There is a statutory requirement that every child looked after has a current Personal Education Plan (PEP). This plan is reviewed every term as part of a formal meeting. As a foster carer, you should be invited to PEP meetings in order to contribute your views and agree what you are able to do to support your foster child's education. PEP's are the forum to discuss the education plan and any changes or additional support that is required. The child or young person should wherever possible and appropriate attend their PEP meeting, their views should always be gathered and shared at the meeting.

The PEP meeting is also where discussions around additional funding through Pupil Premium Plus should take place and be agreed. For up-to-date information on PEP's and Pupil Premium Funding, please go to the Virtual School Website <http://www.somersetvirtualschool.co.uk/>

Many foster carers have found it useful for copies of communication from the school about the child to be sent to both them and the parents. This would include formal things like school reports as well as invitations to events and meetings. You should talk to your supervising social worker about how best to arrange this.

Money for school meals, trips and equipment is taken into account in the Fostering Allowance payment.

## **Homework**

Foster children are likely to have had a disrupted education for one reason or another. This may make it more difficult for them to concentrate on their studies. Foster carers should find them a quiet place to do their homework and actively encourage and assist them where necessary. Show an interest in what they are studying and how they are progressing. Be proud of their achievements, however small, and let them know about it.

## **Parent's Evenings**

Children whose parents or carers show an interest in their education, growth and learning achieve best in the educational system. Therefore, it is important that foster carers attend Parent's Evenings and any other parents meetings at the child's school. Where possible this should be agreed with the child's parents. Some parents lack confidence in these matters and are often grateful if you can go together, support them and possibly ask questions on their behalf. If you are unable to attend Parent's Evenings, it is expected that you will make an appointment to discuss your foster child's progress at an alternative time with their teachers. If you are unsure about the best way to deal with the situation, talk to your supervising social worker.

## **Children with Special Educational Needs**

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), which include physical, emotional or cognitive difficulties, can affect a child or young person's ability to learn.

Some children may require an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan which identifies their educational, health and social needs and sets out the additional support required to meet those needs.

Some children with disabilities are entitled to receive Disability Living Allowance. The following policy explains what this is for and expectations of you as a carer as to how it should be used. <https://www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk/resources/downloads/>

## Health

All Children in Care must be permanently registered with GPs. If they are only temporarily registered the practice will not have their full notes, their immunisation reminders will go to the wrong address and any health issues that may arise while temporarily registered may never join up with their main records.

Foster carers should also ensure that children receive their full programme of immunisation against serious illnesses, although consent from the birth parents will probably be needed for this.

As a foster carer you are expected to organise and facilitate regular dental and optical check-ups and treatment and record these appointments.

It is important that parents are involved at all stages in their child's health care, as they usually know most about what has happened in the past. Whether or not you involve parents in taking a child for non-urgent treatment should be covered in the placement agreement. Please check this with the child's social worker. Each Child in Care will have a Health Plan which is regularly reviewed.

As a responsible parent you are expected to promote a healthy active lifestyle and healthy food within your home.

If you are caring for an older child it is important that you discuss an approach to sexual health and sexual health education with the child's social worker so that you feel comfortable in your approach to the child and can keep them safe from harm.

## Health Assessments

All Children in Care should have an initial health assessment within 20 working days of being placed into Local Authority care. This is organised by the child's social worker. All initial health assessments are carried out by a doctor, usually a paediatrician, at one of the main hospitals. Sometimes an assessment will have been carried out recently enough for a new one not to be necessary. There are two nurses specifically for children looked after who have responsibility for co-ordinating health assessments and promoting the health of children looked after.

It is important to encourage children to take advantage of the health assessments and reassure them that this is not an intrusive process. Many children can miss out on routine medical, dental or optician check-ups as they move around, with the potential for serious problems to get overlooked. Health promotion is also important as many lifestyle choices can have an effect on health.

## **Medical Consents**

Medical consent for treatment will be agreed in the Placement Agreement form and normally will rest with the Local Authority or parent.

However, if emergency treatment is needed, your responsibility is to ensure treatment is provided. You should inform the child's social worker, your supervising social worker and the parents as soon as possible (or Emergency Duty Team if out of office hours).

## **Personal Health Records**

Every child under five should have a Personal Health Record. Known as the "Red Book", this should go with them wherever they move. If you do not have a Red Book for your child, you should consult your supervising social worker. Each Child in Care in Somerset is also provided with a version of this book called a "Blue Book" or "Health Passport".

It is useful for you to know what illnesses the child has had, which injections have been given, any allergies or special dietary needs, and any illnesses or health problems which run in the family.

Even though a health visitor or local doctor will probably do it, it's a good idea for a carer to measure a child's height and weight occasionally. You should also keep your own record of their health, including illnesses, visits to the doctor and accidents.

## **Guidance and Boundaries**

In any home there needs to be basic rules and boundaries. A foster home is no exception. A basic level of structure and routine has to be maintained, although this should be kept under review so as to accommodate the changing needs of the child, you and your family.

When the child is given responsibility, you must be sure that the goal set is achievable for them. Try to ask children to do what you want them to do clearly rather than tell them "don't do...". Foster children frequently carry with them a sense of failure, often blaming themselves for whatever may have happened to them and/or their family. Whatever the result the child should be praised, and all positive outcomes supported and encouraged. Small achievable steps which can be positively re-enforced and built upon need to be identified.

## **Building Relationships and Stability**

Each foster family is different, but the essence of a successful fostering placement is that the child should, as soon as possible, feel both comfortable and accepted in your household.

Good relationships are founded on understanding and respect for another person's point of view, even if you don't agree with it. You therefore need to appreciate that your way of seeing and doing things may be very different from that of the child placed

with you. You should recognise the child's needs, what the aims of the placement are and the part you are expected to play. Hence the importance of clear Care Plans.

Relationships also take time to build. They depend on patience, perseverance and the ability to understand inappropriate behaviour. Positive ways to establish a closer bond with a child who may have experienced destructive and abusive behaviour from the adults in his or her life should be discussed and explored.

The behaviour of a child with this type of background can often be accompanied by physical or verbal aggression. This can evoke all kinds of feelings and reactions in carers, from dislike to fear to anger. A fuller understanding of the child's behaviour, emotional level and attachment difficulties will help you to respond appropriately.

A carer must understand that it is impossible to change the past. Initially it is therefore important to concentrate on the present circumstances and relationships, and to build on these and future aspirations.

## **Promoting Identity**

Every child needs to establish an identity for themselves, a clear idea of who they are and where they have come from. For children who are fostered and have probably been through stressful times, this can be especially difficult, and there can be gaps in the story of their life.

Whilst the child is living with you, make sure you take photos and keep records and mementos of important events, including family visits and special days out. Make sure you write down the fun and positive information to keep for your child and your records, and not just the days which are difficult. This information, in addition to photos and mementos, will help the social worker with their Life Story Work with the child, and will be important to the child potentially into adulthood, for example when they have their own children.

The Life Story Work (and later life letter if the plan is adoption) are very sensitive pieces of work and are generally completed by the social worker who knows the child, their family and all the relevant background information to ensure all the facts are correct. It is not expected that you are asked to do this work but pass the information you have gathered to the social worker. However you are a crucial part of a child's life and your input is invaluable to the life story process. Your relationship with the child might be such that you are asked to play a more active role in this piece of work if you feel comfortable to do so. The plan on how this work will be done should be based what suits each individual child's needs best.

## **Behaviour Management**

An 'overarching principle should be the behaviour you want to see more of is the behaviour you should pay most attention to'. The aim is to shape a child's behaviour by catching them being good and wherever possible ignoring or distracting negative behaviour. It is advisable to always explore any use of limit setting techniques that fall within the permitted sanctions in your supervision to ensure they will be effective.

Underlying this are certain principles which seek to guide carers in managing behaviour effectively. They are:

- Seeking to reward good behaviour;
- Adopting a non-confrontational approach;
- Establishing a good relationship/rapport with children and young people based on mutual respect;
- Establishing house rules which are consistent, explicit and applicable to all children and young people within the household including birth children;
- Acknowledging and appreciating the past life experiences which the children and young people bring;
- The use of age/developmental stage appropriate sanctions when necessary, not as routine;

Somerset offers training to carers in relation to managing challenging behaviour and Foster carers should be given a full copy of the policy by their supervising social worker and you can also find a copy using the following link:

<https://www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk/fostering-resources/downloads/>

## Computer Use

Carers should be aware of the potential dangers of the internet as well as its obvious benefits for both education and leisure. Carers should ensure that internet filters, also known as parental controls, appropriate to the age of the children are installed. If possible, computers should be located in communal areas within the household, and carers should monitor their use. Children should be educated and guided by you on the safe use of social media and this aspect of care should be regularly discussed with the child's social worker and your supervising social worker. Somerset provides training to foster carers on safe internet use.

## Bullying

Studies show that over half of all young people say they have been bullied at some time. School is one of the likeliest places for this to happen.

Bullying involves an ongoing campaign of physical or psychological violence conducted by an individual or group against someone who is unable to defend him or herself in that situation. It doesn't have to involve actual physical assault, name calling (face-to-face or via the internet), extortion of food or money and exclusion from friendship can be just as wounding. Children who are picked on tend to be those who are different in some way from others in the school.

Bullying can have serious effects on a child's emotional state and self-confidence in much the same way as domestic physical abuse. Often they will not tell anyone about it through fear of reprisals or being thought of as a sneak. However, it must not be tolerated. All Schools should now have a specific anti-bullying policy and take any concerns raised about bullying seriously. As a foster carer your role is to support the child in your care and address any worries about bullying with the support of the child's social worker and your supervising social worker.

## Drugs and Alcohol

Children and young people can experiment with drugs and alcohol. Sometimes this is just experimentation. However, children we look after are more likely to have experienced loss and trauma and therefore be more vulnerable to more serious drug and alcohol misuse. The child you are caring for will continue to need your care and support. If you are concerned about the use of drugs or alcohol please speak with your supervising social worker and the child's social worker who will support you in positively managing this. Additional support may be required.

Below are government guidelines about children drinking alcohol:

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/alcohol-facts/alcohol-and-the-law/the-law-on-alcohol-and-under-18s/>

## Child Sexual Exploitation

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a form of sexual abuse that affects thousands of children and young people every year in the UK, when young people under 18 receive 'something' (food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) in exchange for performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities. It can happen to any young person from any background and affects boys and young men as well as girls and young women.

There are 3 important and recognisable elements of child sexual exploitation:

- Children are 'groomed' and there is power and control held by the perpetrator/s
- An 'exchange' (such as gift, food, money, drugs etc.) is present, this could be to a third party and not always to the child themselves.
- Sexual acts or the exchange of sexual images is present.

If you are worried about a child you are looking after or are being asked to look after, seek support from your supervising social worker. There is training available for foster carers and information on the Somerset Children's Safeguarding Board which is helpful including the CSE Quick Guide Booklet which you can access using the following links:

<https://sscb.safeguardingsomerset.org.uk/>

<https://sscb.safeguardingsomerset.org.uk/working-with-children/cse-protocols/>

## Preparing a Child for Independence

Children are preparing for adult life throughout their childhood through opportunities provided for them by their parents and carers to try and learn new things. Foster carers have a vital role in helping children develop skills and experiences that will equip them for adult life. Foster carers should enable children's development by involving them in household tasks when able and in a fun way, and encouraging them to look after themselves. You can help children incrementally as they get older to learn about money and budgeting, cooking, personal care and learning important relationship skills through role modelling and helping them try things within safe perimeters. Importantly



we all need the opportunity to make mistakes and feel safe and good enough to “have another go”.

Most young people are not equipped to live independently until they are past the age of 18, and it's important that young people do not feel that they have to leave home at that age. Our priority is to support young people to continue to live with you until they are ready to move into independence successfully. So, it's a delicate balance with older children of helping them learn the skills that they need without giving them a sense that we are working through a list of things they need to know so that we can ask them to leave home.

Each child and each foster family is different and you should use your supervision sessions with your supervising social worker and discussions with the child's social worker to support you in getting this balance right.

## **Placement Endings**

Placements should, whenever possible, end in a planned way in accordance with the plan for the child. This will often be a return to family members or to permanent care through adoption, permanent fostering or special guardianship. The transition from your care to the child's new home should be carefully planned with the social worker and follow the child's pace. It is important for the child that they do not feel either rejected by you or that they feel guilty for leaving you. Therefore, there should be introductions and the child should see you positively supporting their new carers and them in the transition. You may well need additional emotional support at this time as you will have your own feelings to manage associated with loss and change.

Sometimes placements end in an unplanned way which is traumatic for the child and carer. It is important that in these circumstances we find a way to positively end placements with a “goodbye” visit where possible. All carers are expected to write a positive letter or card to each child they care for more than one week which highlights what they did in their time with the carer and their family, what was fun, and what the carer will remember. Your supervising social worker will help you with this.

Foster carers are expected to provide adequate clothing for the child to go to their new placement, and luggage in which to transport it.

When any placement ends in an unplanned way, it is important for everyone involved to understand what has happened and learn lessons for the future. For longer term placements this information is shared during a Disruption Meeting.

Whenever any placement of over 17 days duration ends, you will be asked to complete an End of Placement form whether the placement ended in a planned or unplanned way. This is an opportunity to reflect on what went well and what could have been done better.

## **Allegations against Foster Carers**

Occasionally children and young people make an allegation or complaint about their carer. We have a duty in these circumstances to investigate thoroughly what has been said. If what is said means that we are worried that a child may be at risk or that a

criminal offence may have taken place a strategy meeting will be held with the police to plan how the investigation should take place and whether the police should be involved in the initial investigation. We will also need to make a decision about whether the child concerned, and any other children, are safe to remain in your care whilst enquiries are made. Most investigations are carried out by the Local Authority.

We recognise that this is a highly stressful time for carers. The investigation is undertaken by a social worker or manager from another area and you continue to be supported through the process by your supervising social worker. You are entitled to free legal advice and representation through your membership of Foster Talk. Your supervising social worker will also offer you the opportunity to be separately supported through an Independent social worker through Foster Talk.

Following an investigation, a Fostering Review will be held and then all the information will be presented to Fostering Panel. The Fostering Review is an opportunity to not only discuss the allegation and its impact, but also to reflect on what has gone well in the fostering task and give a balanced overview. Your Independent Support social worker can support you through the review and Fostering Panel.

## Complaints

Sometimes complaints and grumbles are made by children or adults about the care a foster carer is giving. They can often arise from a misunderstanding or poor communication. If a complaint is made about you this will be resolved where possible through a discussion with your supervising social worker or potentially their team manager.

You also have the right to complain about the service you are receiving as a carer or on behalf of a child. Where possible these should be resolved directly with the person concerned, but if the issue is not resolved Somerset have a complaints procedure.

<http://www.somerset.gov.uk/have-your-say/complaints-comments-and-compliments/complaints-comments-compliments/>

## Useful Contacts

East Fostering Team	01823 357834 01749 822948 01935 463867
West Fostering Team	01823 357433
FAST	01823 357434
Therapeutic Foster Care	01823 357849
Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team	01823 357434
Foster Carer Support Line out of hours	01823 358192
EDT	0300 123 2327
SCIL (training)	01823 357977
Foster Talk	01527 836 910 or <a href="http://www.fostertalk.org">www.fostertalk.org</a>
Foster Care Association	<a href="mailto:SFCA@somerset.gov.uk">SFCA@somerset.gov.uk</a>
First Response	0300 123 2327
Somerset Direct	0300 123 2224
CLA Nurse	01935 463653 / 01935 463654
Virtual School	<a href="mailto:VirtualSchool@somerset.gov.uk">VirtualSchool@somerset.gov.uk</a>
Foster Carer Payments	01823 357876
Care First	0800 174319

## Useful Links

Below is a list of links you may find useful:

Somerset County Council

[www.somerset.gov.uk](http://www.somerset.gov.uk)

Fostering Website

[www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk](http://www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk)

FosterTalk

[www.fostertalk.org](http://www.fostertalk.org)

Children and Families Learning and Development

<http://extranet.somerset.gov.uk/children-and-families-learning-and-development/>

Education Support Services

<https://www.somerset.org.uk/Pages/Welcome.aspx>

Department for Education

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>

The South West Child Protection Procedures

<https://www.proceduresonline.com/swcpp/>

Somerset Care Councils

<https://www.somersetincarecouncils.org.uk/>

Fostering Services National Minimum Standards

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-services-national-minimum-standards>

Foster Carer's Charter

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foster-carers-charter>

CAFCASS

<https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/>

Somerset Safeguarding Children's Board

<http://sscb.safeguardingsomerset.org.uk/>

MOMO (Mind of my own)

<http://mindofmyown.org.uk/>