



HM Government

Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children

February 2026

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Government of the United Kingdom
Department for Education

Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children

Presented to Parliament
by Josh MacAlister OBE MP, Minister for Children and Families
by Command of His Majesty

February 2026

CP 1503

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Introduction

Now more than ever, we want to celebrate the remarkable contribution foster carers make and increase the number of foster carers in England, so more children can find loving homes. That means being ambitious and creative about how we grow foster families and empower those who support them to be more flexible and effective. The care system should protect children and provide for their daily needs – but it should also do much more than that. It should enable children to build loving relationships and strong foundations that support growth, confidence and hope for the future. This starts with renewing fostering by supporting more families to foster, so they can support our most vulnerable children.

We have already begun prioritising loving family relationships in our reforms to children's social care. Our investment of £2.4 billion over the Spending Review period will rebalance services towards earlier intensive help through Families First Partnerships, supporting more families to stay together safely through early intervention, while ensuring a rigorous multi-agency response to child protection concerns. Through enhancing kinship arrangements, we are enabling more children to stay within their wider family network. We are also taking decisive action and legislating to address market challenges and tackle profiteering.

When children cannot remain with their families, they should still grow up in loving homes. Foster families are central to that promise, as they offer the love, safety and stability children need.

Today we are publishing an ambitious action plan which sets out the urgent steps we will take to address the sharp decline in foster carers and reform the foster care system. It summarises the current challenges, sets out our vision for the future, and outlines our first steps toward delivering an improved system.

Alongside this, we are publishing a consultation on [Fostering reform: proposed changes to assessment and handling allegations of abuse](#) which invites views from those with professional and direct experience of fostering to help us shape changes to the regulatory framework, update standards, and revise statutory guidance.

Some reforms will require primary legislation or further supporting evidence, so we are also launching a call for evidence [Fostering for the future: improving the foster care system](#) to draw on sector expertise and identify innovative ideas to inform future proposals.

This Government will celebrate and fully recognise foster carers' incredible commitment to the children in their care. Recruiting more foster families is pivotal to our ambitions for children in care, so they can grow-up in loving homes and begin adult life with the confidence that comes from being part of a family that is rooting for them.

Who this publication is for

This policy statement may be of interest to:

- Current and former foster carers
- People with lived experience of the care system
- Local Authority staff
- Independent Fostering Agencies
- Fostering panel members
- Organisations and charities who regularly engage with foster carers, and/or children and young people in foster care

Alongside this document we have also produced a [version for children and young people in the care system](#).

Main points

This document sets out the challenges in the current fostering system, our vision for the future of fostering, and an action plan describing how we will begin to build it. It focuses on five main areas:

1. England-wide scale action to expand fostering
2. Enhanced regional collaboration
3. Innovation to improve outcomes for children
4. Stronger support around foster families
5. A simpler rulebook that puts trusted relationships first

Our vision

The quality and number of loving, stable relationships a child has - while in care and into adulthood - should be the clearest measure of how well the care system is working. The future of fostering in England should be built around the adults best able to provide the care a child needs - whether short term, long term or shared. It should help protect children's existing relationships and where needed, build positive, lasting new ones. Putting relationships first will help keep brothers and sisters together, build stronger networks around families and carers, and give young people leaving care a better foundation for adult life.

Every child who cannot live with their birth family deserves the warmth, stability and belonging of a home where they are loved. For most children, this will be best met by their wider family network - grandparents, aunts, uncles or others who already know and love them - stepping into a caring role. That will not be right for every child. For those children who cannot stay with their family, finding someone they can trust depends on having a broad and diverse range of foster families available. Children should be able to benefit from a loving foster home while growing up close to their extended family, friends, school, and wider community.

Across England, there are thousands more households that could offer loving, safe and stable homes. We need to recruit them through a process which is robust but quick, and ensure carers have the practical and emotional support they need to keep caring.

That is why we will grow the number of local authority (LA) and third sector foster places by 10,000 by 2029. This will help thousands more children live closer to home with families that can meet their needs. It will reduce reliance on expensive for-profit provision in foster care and residential care, creating savings which can be reinvested in supporting children. We have an ambitious plan to deliver this change, backed by £88 million over the next two years.

Our approach is guided by the National Framework for Children's Social Care. Increasing the number of foster carers - and improving the support available to children in care, their carers, and foster families - is essential to keeping children safe, providing stable and loving homes, and enabling the long-term relationships that help children recover and thrive. This work also underpins the Government's Opportunity Mission, making sure children in care are well supported to succeed and access important opportunities.

We want to renew and re-energise fostering, and build a system with:

1. National scale actions to expand fostering

We need to recognise and value our foster carers, inspiring and attracting people to consider becoming foster carers and signposting them to regional fostering hubs and LAs where they can access further information and apply. This is why we are planning a national communications campaign for fostering, working with the sector. National and regional communications activity will help raise awareness of fostering and ensure prospective foster carers can easily understand what being a foster carer involves and what to expect when they enquire or apply.

Where digital tools are needed across fostering services and for prospective applicants, we will use national Government levers to ensure we get the best quality and value in digital transformation.

We will increase the number of foster families and create a more diverse range of fostering models, so children can be matched with families that are able to meet their needs. Fostering services will be expected to prioritise recruitment and retention of carers and to improve where performance is weak.

Experienced Local Authority foster carers will be able to create extra space in their homes to provide loving care for more children and keep siblings together. We will also make

fostering more attractive to those who cannot foster full-time but want to play a meaningful role in children's lives.

More children will be supported in family settings, with residential care focused clearly on those with the most complex needs and on helping children with intensive therapeutic interventions so they can move back into family-based settings.

There is a need to rebalance the market. Our plan focuses predominantly on strengthening local authority fostering provision, which has seen the biggest decrease in foster carers in recent years. At the same time, we want to see an expansion of third sector provision, as well as learning from private providers who achieve good outcomes for children and how any best practice can be spread across the system.

Our wider reforms will also mean that local authorities, working together as Regional Care Co-operatives, can co-ordinate their approach to private provision more effectively. This will mean they can plan and purchase support from Independent Fostering Agencies, using collective negotiation to improve value for local government, and ensure that care meets the needs of children.

2. Enhanced regional collaboration

Stronger regional working - through fostering hubs with an expanded range of responsibilities, which will ultimately nest in Regional Care Cooperatives - will give children and families more consistent, joined up support. The experience of the ten existing fostering recruitment hubs has already demonstrated the potential benefits of greater collaboration across local authorities. By pooling resources and acting together across larger geographical areas, regions can plan more effectively, improve value for money, build expertise and create specialist types of care.

Existing hubs focus on the recruitment of carers. We will expand the remit of hubs so that they encompass the entire assessment and approval process, and provide ongoing support and training for foster carers, helping create a streamlined and effective end-to-end approach. This will help boost the number of foster carers, and therefore homes available for children, while improving value for money and creating a more joined up system that supports families early, not just at crisis point. Not-for-profit providers will be encouraged to partner with hubs to support the successful rollout.

3. Innovation that improves outcomes for children

Our innovation programme will support the development and testing of innovative ways of caring that better reflect children's lives and families' circumstances. We want to support organisations across the sector to work together to increase the number of foster carers, improve placement stability and support the successful placement of children with more complex needs by testing new approaches and scaling existing evidence-based models.

This will help us bring fostering into the 21st century and keep children connected to trusted adults and create more lasting relationships, help them move safely from residential care into families, and speed up the recruitment process.

4. Stronger support around foster families

We will help carers create stable, loving homes where children can maintain their existing lifelong relationships, build new ones, and feel part of their community.

Stronger local peer networks will create a sense of community around fostering families. Carers will be able to make decisions for children they look after. They will be able to rely on trusted people in their own networks to balance care with everyday life.

We will empower the workforce to be creative so that support for children and carers will be more tailored to their needs. Families will have clearer lead practitioners and help that focuses on strengths and prevention - not just crisis response.

There will be greater transparency on the payments and benefits offered to foster carers.

5. A simpler rulebook that puts trusted relationships first

A reformed framework will put children's relationships at the heart of every decision. This means fewer unnecessary moves, more continuity of care, and stability as a core principle of everyday practice. It will make fostering workable alongside everyday life, so that unnecessary rules no longer get in the way of ordinary family experiences. It will strengthen accountability by rejecting the flawed model that confusing and overlapping checks make things safer.

Our ambition is clear and achievable: a country where more children in care can live in a family, carers are trusted and supported, and decisions are made with confidence and compassion. By simplifying rules, strengthening networks and working together regionally, we will create more places for children to live in families - creating the conditions for loving relationships that last.

Problem overview

This section sets out key data on the current fostering system in England and establishes why, despite the efforts of so many carers, social workers and other practitioners, we urgently need to act to ensure our vulnerable children and young people have the best support possible.

Foster carers go above and beyond every day to care for some of the most vulnerable children - offering stability, patience and love when it matters most.

Young person in care

“Since being in care it has changed my life around as a whole to much more positivity and more achievements and successes. I have achieved so many things which I never thought of achieving. They have found the perfect family for me. Now I don’t want to leave. If I had the chance, I would stay there my whole life. I see my foster carers as my real parents. Even my social workers as family. Overall, being in foster care is fantastic.”

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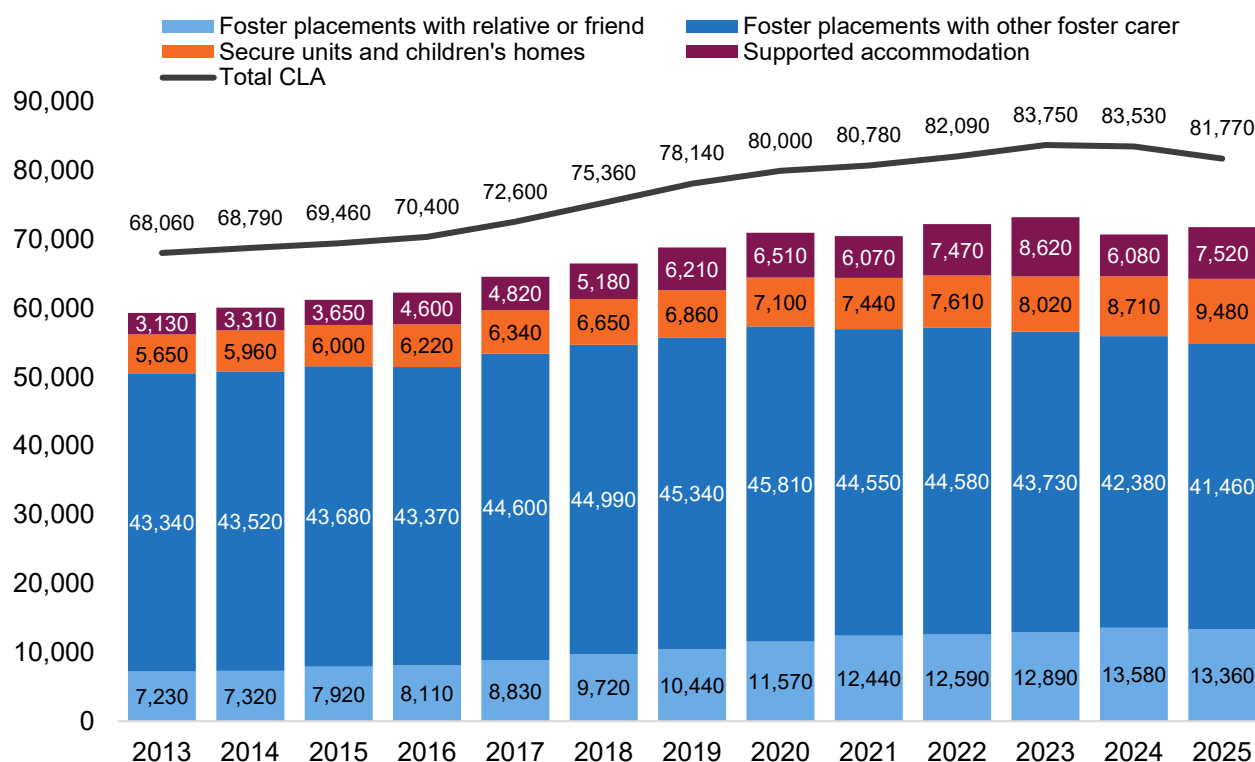
Most children who enter care live with foster families. As of March 2025, there were 81,770 children in care. Out of all children in care, 54,820 - or around two thirds of all children in care - were living in foster homes, supported by 42,190 fostering households.² Carers help children through crisis, rebuild confidence and experience the safety and security every child deserves. Many children in foster care are in permanent placements while some are there temporarily with a long-term plan for them to return to their family. In 2024-25, 44% of households had a permanent primary placement while 56% were classed as non-permanent.³

¹ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/from-surviving-to-thriving-the-seven-drivers-of-well-being-for-children-in-care-and-care-leavers/>

² [Main findings: fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK](#) (underlying data)

³ [Main findings: fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK](#) (underlying data)

Figure 1: Number of children in care at 31 March 2025 by placement type



This breakdown does not include the 'placed for adoption', 'placed with parents or other person with responsibility', 'residential' or 'other' placement types

Source: [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2025 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

However, this system is under acute strain. The number of foster carers is falling. Since 2019, the number of approved mainstream foster carers has steadily declined from 64,295 to 56,345 in 2025 - a reduction of around 12%.⁴ 70% of mainstream carers are aged over 50: 37% - are in their 50s and around a third are over 60.⁵ The number of children in care has risen sharply, from 64,460 in 2010 to 81,770 in 2025, levels not seen since the 1980s.

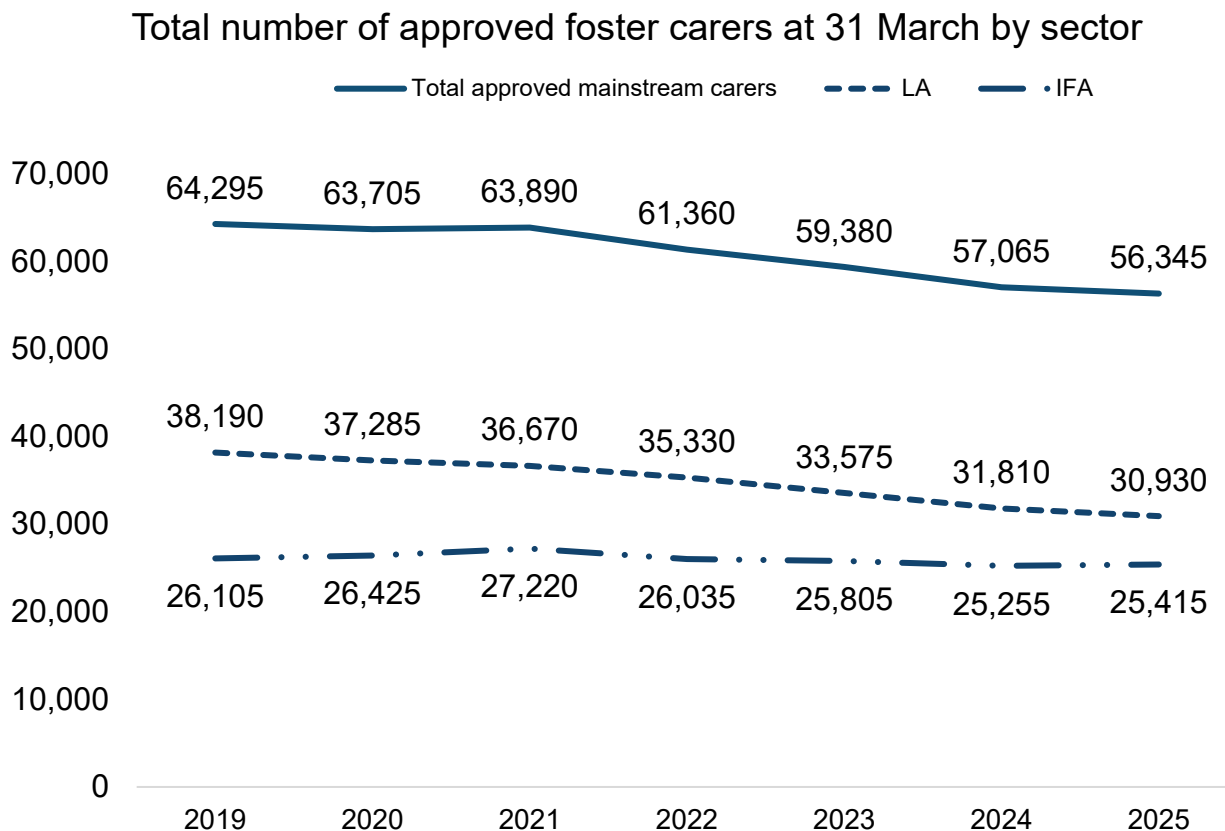
The makeup of children in care has changed too. On average, children now enter care at an older age and often experience multiple, overlapping difficulties which are not being addressed effectively. This shift is partly driven by an increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), who are typically older teenage boys, and spend shorter periods in care. The needs of these children may differ from the wider population of children in care. At the same time, cuts to preventative spending have led to services responding to

⁴ 'Mainstream' foster carers refer to all foster carers (including permanent, non-permanent, short-break and fostering to adopt arrangements) except those with a primary placement offer of formal kinship care arrangements (known as a kinship foster carer or a family and friends foster carer).

⁵ [Main findings: fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

crisis rather than preventing them. This Government’s £2.4 billion investment in early intensive help will tackle this.

Figure 2: Approved foster carers by sector at 31 March 2025



Sources: [Fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK](#); [Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 - GOV.UK – underlying data](#)

Keeping carers is as important as recruiting new ones. Data last published in 2021 showed nearly 30% of carers leave fostering within their first two years in the role.⁶ Many carers tell us they feel excluded from decisions, undervalued, and not trusted as the adults raising the children in their care. They also face limited mental health and SEND support, and services that step in late rather than offering help at an early stage to avoid problems escalating.⁷

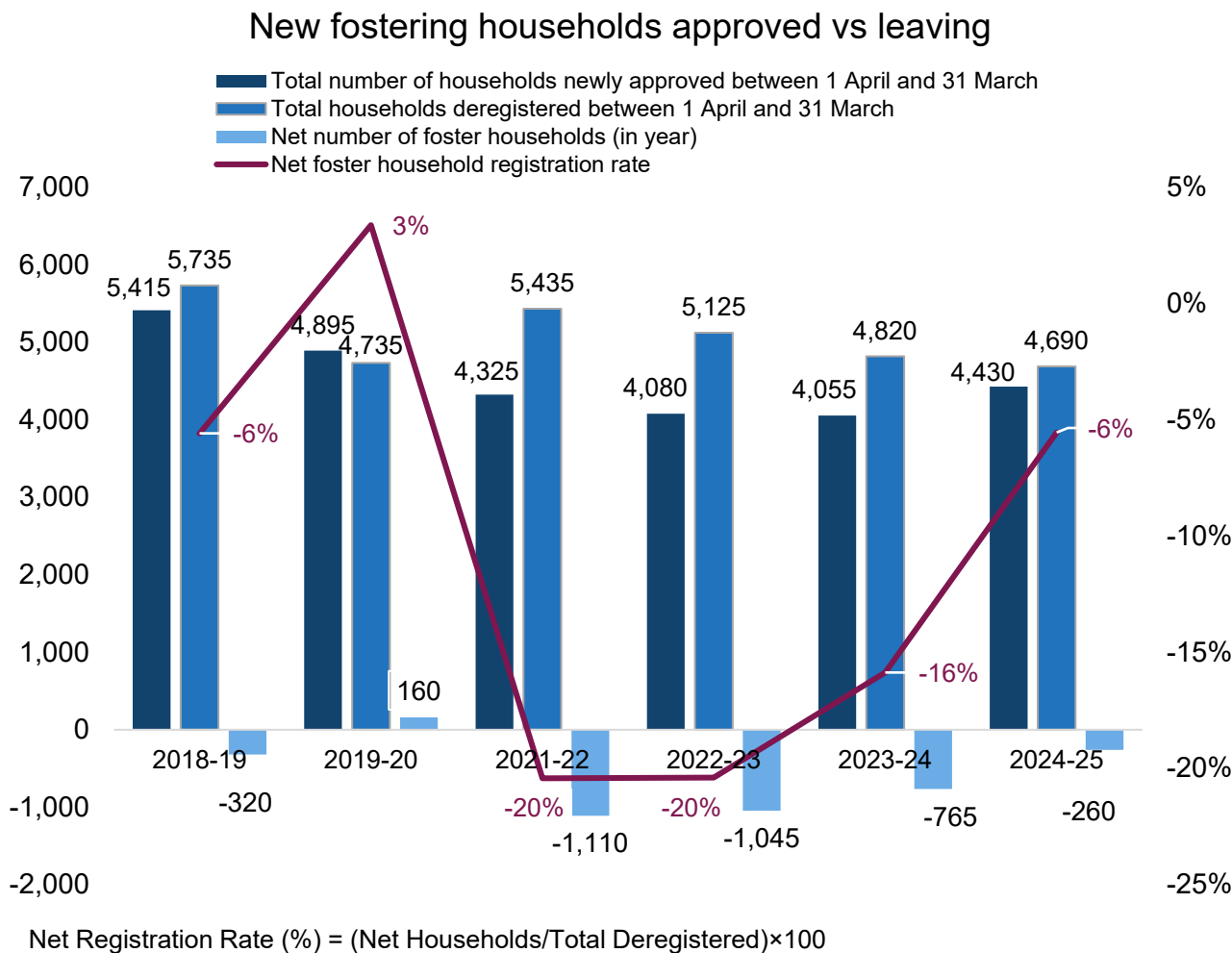
Social workers and other practitioners go above and beyond every day to support children in care and foster families, but they are too stretched and restricted. High turnover among social workers further weakens relationships. Gaps in out-of-hours support, limited short breaks, and inconsistent training add to the pressure on families. Programmes such as Mockingbird provide valuable support, but their reach is not yet wide enough to counter the

⁶ [Main findings: fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK](#) (underlying data)

⁷ [State of the Nations' Foster Care 2024](#)

pressures driving carers to leave. Retention and recruitment are closely linked. When carers leave feeling unheard or exhausted, this discourages others from coming forward.

Figure 3: Number of new fostering households approved vs leaving



Sources: Fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK;
Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 - GOV.UK – underlying data

The fostering system has not kept pace with how families live today. Cost of living pressures, housing constraints and changing family patterns all affect who can foster. Few households can rely on one adult staying at home full time. Yet many more people could foster - if support was modern, carers were trusted and valued, and fostering worked alongside everyday life.

The consequences are stark. Too many children in care have little choice about where they live. Some are placed far from their community, or in homes that cannot meet their needs, experiencing repeated breakdowns that disrupt relationships with friends, teachers and family.

As fostering capacity has fallen, more children are living in residential care, with a 24% increase from 14,740 children in residential care in 2020 to 18,270 in 2025.⁸ However, this rise in numbers alone does not explain the significant growth in cost. Between 2020-21 and 2024-25, local authority spending on residential care doubled, reaching £3.7 billion.⁹ The Competition and Markets Authority found that the largest children's residential care providers made profits of 22% on average.¹⁰ Despite this, children in residential care continue to have worse outcomes than children in other forms of care.

Children who grow up in foster care generally experience better long-term health, social and economic outcomes than those who spent childhood in residential care settings.¹¹ Evidence shows that outcomes in adulthood – including health, employment, and family stability – vary significantly by care type, with children who lived in residential homes facing the poorest life-course trajectories, and those in foster or kinship care showing comparatively better outcomes.¹²

Many children in residential care could, and should, be living in foster families. Recent research using a measure of children's needs showed that 20% of children in residential care had scores that would be below average for a child in foster care, and nearly half (45%) fell within the same range as children in foster care.¹³ This suggests that many children who are currently in residential care could be in foster care if we had the right foster families in the right places. Ofsted research, looking at a small group of children living in children's homes that were visited by Ofsted inspectors in late 2019, highlighted that one third of children living in children's residential homes originally had foster care on their care plan but were instead placed in residential care.¹⁴ We must not continue diverting children into residential care when this is not in their best interests. We need more foster carers now to ensure that children are growing up in family homes, where their existing relationships can be protected and, if they need to stay in foster care long term, they can build lasting and loving connections.

Too many children in foster care are placed far from home or experience multiple moves and school changes.¹⁵ Stable, loving relationships are among the strongest protective factors for healing and growth, learning and future opportunities. Breaking those connections makes it harder for children to thrive. We need more carers - especially in the places children live - so children can stay close to the people and communities that matter to them. We also need to support children in care and foster families more to prevent relationships breaking down or children needing to move to get more specialist help.

The cost for local authorities is rising sharply. Independent fostering agencies (IFAs) now provide 45% of mainstream fostering households and 48% of filled places.¹⁶ As of 31 March 2025, there were 339 IFAs in England, most of which (84%) are privately owned.¹⁷

⁸ [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

⁹ [LA and school expenditure, Financial year 2024-25 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁰ [Competition and Markets Authority market study into Children's Social Care](#)

¹¹ [Post-16 educational and employment outcomes of children in need - GOV.UK](#)

¹² [The lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories of people who have been in care - ADR UK Outcomes from fostering \(BERRI/NAFP\) May24 | Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers](#)

¹⁴ [Why do children go into children's homes? - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁵ [Stability measures for children looked after in England, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

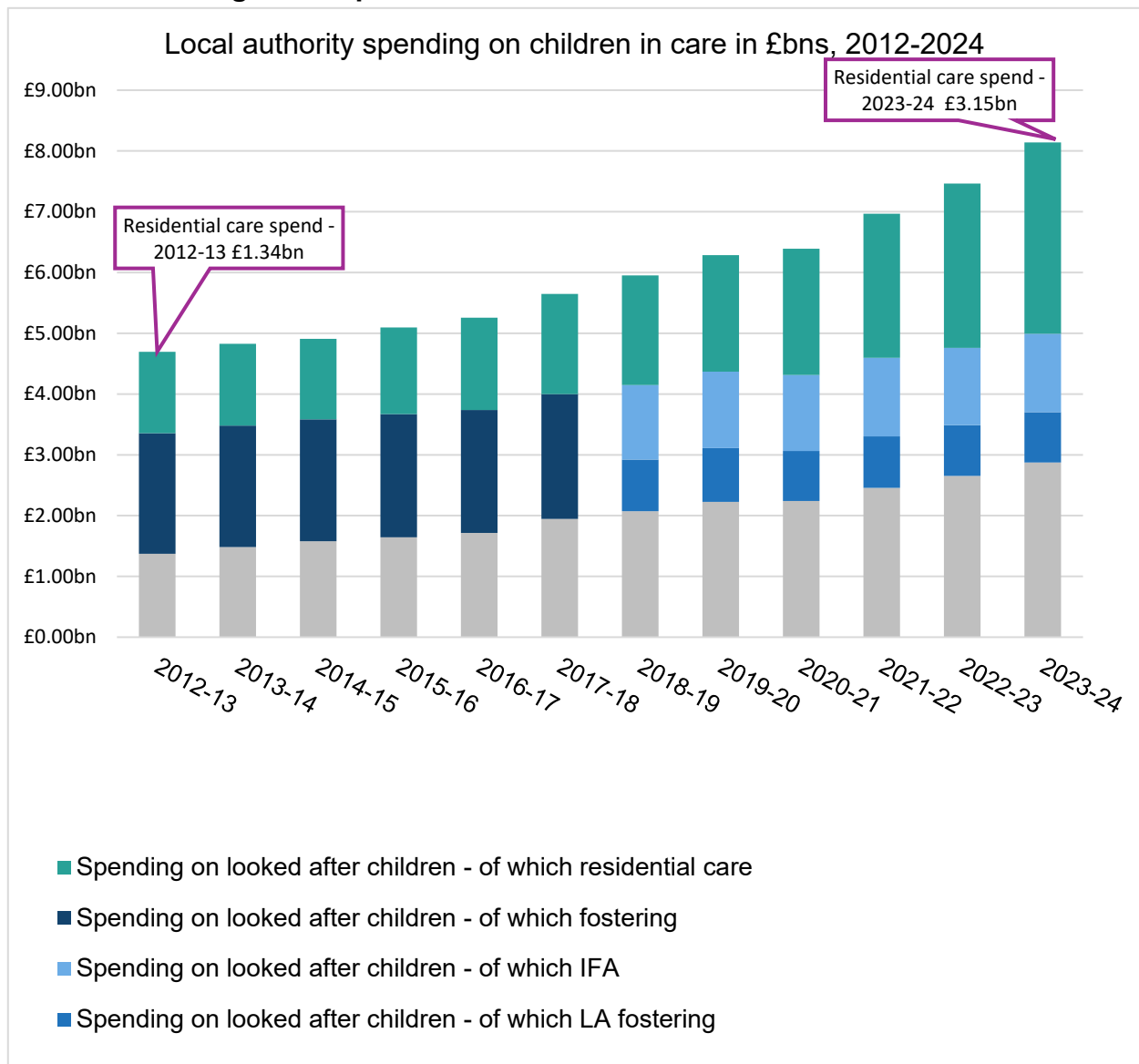
¹⁶ [Main findings: fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁷ [Main findings: ownership of children's social care providers in England 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

Analysis from the Competition and Markets Authority showed that the largest IFAs make average operating margins of 19.4%.¹⁸ This is much higher than the annual net rate of return for private non-financial corporations, which was 10.3% in 2024.¹⁹ Costs of IFAs sit within a wider £16 billion spend on children and young people’s services in 2024-25 - £9 billion of which was spent on children in care. Spending on children in care has grown significantly over the last decade in real terms (an increase of 69%), especially residential care (an increase of 135%) which has grown disproportionately, and faster than other forms of care.

The shortage of carers means that the costs of all placements rises, as local authorities have little choice and cannot achieve value for money. A lack of foster carers is bad for children in its own right, but also worsens local authorities’ financial sustainability, and therefore limits investment in supporting children and families.

Figure 4: Spend on looked after children in real terms



¹⁸ [Competition and Markets Authority market study into Children's Social Care](#)

¹⁹ Profitability of UK companies - Office for National Statistics

Source: [LA and school expenditure, Financial year 2024-25 - - GOV.UK](#)

Interest in fostering is not the problem. In 2024–25 there were almost 150,000 enquiries but only 7,365 newly approved foster carers.²⁰ The recruitment process itself is clunky in many places, with those who express an interest waiting weeks or months for a reply or facing delays in assessment. Within local authorities, 59% of fostering assessments take over six months to complete, and 29% of assessments take over eight months with many carers dropping out along the way. Our standards currently set out that fostering assessments should be concluded within eight months. This is longer than adoption assessments, which are meant to conclude within six months, despite the fact the decision involved is less permanent for children and families, and there is a greater level of ongoing social worker oversight of foster carers than of adopters.

For over a decade, the fostering system has lacked clear and consistent leadership. In that vacuum, inconsistencies in practice have grown, inspection regimes have become too focused on compliance and services have become overly bureaucratic.

The system has not placed children’s own experiences at its heart and has left fostering families and practitioners without clarity on what is and is not allowed. Rather than supporting high-quality, common-sense practice, we have a complex framework of legislation, standards and guidance which is difficult to apply, driving excessive bureaucracy, inconsistent decision-making, and confusion across the sector. The result is stark: too many children are unable to access a foster home when they need one, too many dedicated carers are leaving the system and too many people are put off applying to become a carer in the first place.

It has become too rigid and restrictive, with too much risk aversion and not enough focus on supporting the everyday family life of children and their foster families. Carers repeatedly tell us that they do not receive the level of support and respect that they need to carry out their role effectively.

This has led some carers to seek to be recognised as workers. We are clear that in our view fostering should not be considered a form of employment. Foster care should be a family-based vocation, and we do not believe that standard employment regulations reflect its distinctive nature. Fostering homes should feel like family homes with people who love them, not a workplace with staff. We do not believe foster carers need to be considered workers to get the support and respect they need and deserve. But we must ensure that support and respect is provided with far more consistency across the country.

We recognise the urgency of the situation. We will no longer allow decisions about where our most vulnerable children can live to be dictated by a shortage of foster homes. We are setting a clear national direction, rewriting the rule book, and rebuilding a fostering system that is focused relentlessly on children’s needs, carers’ strengths, and the enduring, loving relationships that allow children to thrive. This is a critical moment, and we are determined to act with ambition, pace and absolute clarity of purpose.

²⁰ [Main findings: fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK](#). Note that the number of enquiries is likely to include multiple enquiries from individuals, and that there are variations in how fostering services define enquiries.

Every day that we accept the status quo, we tolerate children being split from brothers and sisters, being sent to live in residential care or needing to leave school and friends. We will no longer accept this situation and we will act with speed to make necessary changes.

Action plan

We need to reverse the decline in foster carers by bringing more people in and by keeping the carers we already have. This requires action at national, regional and local level, and it needs to happen now. **Our action plan will build on previous investment of £36 million between 2023 and 2025** which included our work to set up regional recruitment hubs and funding for foster carer support. **We will invest a further £88 million, including up to £25 million of capital spend on our Room Makers programme, over the next two financial years.** The plan focuses on five priority areas:

1. National scale action to expand fostering
2. Enhanced regional collaboration
3. Innovation that improves outcomes for children
4. Stronger support around fostering families
5. A simpler rulebook that puts relationships first

1. National scale action to expand fostering

1.1 National fostering recruitment campaign

We are planning a new national recruitment and awareness campaign to inspire more people to foster and celebrate the incredible role foster carers play for children. This campaign will:

- encourage more people from diverse backgrounds to consider fostering
- highlight the skilled, valuable role foster carers provide
- support local and regional efforts to grow the number of foster carers

1.2 New rooms in existing homes: expanding capacity through capital investment

Experienced foster carers offer a significant untapped source of placements, but lack of space is a major barrier. Research shows 31% of foster care households cannot accept more children due to space limitations.²¹ This limits sibling placements which are critical for continuity, emotional security, and a sense of identity for children in care. It can also reduce local authority flexibility, often leaving residential care as the only option.

²¹ <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/state-of-the-nations/state-of-the-nations-foster-care-2024/>

To address this, we want to enable experienced foster carers (with at least two years of experience) to increase space in their homes and create more placements. To support this, we will enable foster carers to apply to their local authority for a grant to make home improvements to adapt and expand their homes and look after additional children. Twenty-eight per cent of foster households (just over 9,000) are only approved to look after one child.²² This is often caused by the lack of additional space: by providing one-off financial assistance, we want to improve the capacity of our most valued foster carers. This would be particularly impactful for siblings and in urban areas, where space is at a premium (e.g. London).

Greater Manchester Combined Authority developed an initiative to increase fostering capacity and their 'Room Makers' scheme won 'The Children in Care Award' at the Children and Young People Now Awards in 2023. Room Makers provides funding and support for foster carers who want to renovate existing spare rooms and foster more children across ten local authorities in the region. As part of the scheme, 26 new bedrooms have been renovated and made available to support children and young people in need of foster placements across Greater Manchester.

We want to build on this best practice and expand Room Makers. We are committing **up to £25 million of capital funding over the next two years**. This investment will:

- expand placement capacity where it is most needed
- improve matching options and outcomes for children, including siblings
- reduce pressure on residential care
- make full use of the skills and experience already in the system

We will work with local authorities to build the evidence base for the long-term benefits of capital investment in foster care and to strengthen joint working between Children's Social Care and Housing departments within local authorities.

1.3 Digital improvements to support applicants

We will develop digital tools that streamline the recruitment and onboarding of prospective foster carers. These tools will make the process clearer, reduce friction at key stages, and give applicants a more predictable and transparent experience from initial enquiry through to approval.

A major challenge for fostering services is inconsistent and incomplete data collection, which limits the ability to understand applicant progress, spot delays, identify what drives successful recruitment. This data is important for fostering services to know where to focus and improve. We will work with local areas to strengthen their data systems so services can track applicants more effectively, target their recruitment activity, and gain clearer insights into what improves conversion from enquiry to approval.

²² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2024-to-31-march-2025> (underlying data)

The digital elements of the fostering package are designed to act as key enablers for increasing the number of foster carers by:

- improving the end-to-end applicant journey that reduces dropout at critical points of the recruitment process;
- increasing data transparency and collection across the Department for Education and participating local authorities – initially focused on fostering recruitment hubs – to support system reform, monitor hub performance, and drive operational efficiency;
- better understanding and targeting recruitment efforts;
- strengthening assessment processes through clearer insights;
- building a more accurate and comprehensive picture of what works across the system.

Ultimately, this strengthened digital and data capability will support a more efficient recruitment and onboarding experience, help services make better informed decisions, and contribute to our wider ambition to increase the number of foster carers.

2. Enhanced regional collaboration

The market for children’s care is fragmented and inefficient when managed at the level of single authorities. Groups of LAs currently lack consistent demand forecasting, bargaining power, and specialist capacity, contributing to cost pressures and placement scarcity. The Independent review of Children Social Care reinforces this by concluding specialist functions such as fostering recruitment, specialist commissioning and market shaping are too disjointed when delivered by individual authorities, and are better carried out regionally.²³ This is why the Government is now moving to Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) to plan, deliver and commission homes for children at scale. RCCs are therefore central to creating a more coherent, collaborative, and sustainable system capable of better meeting children’s needs.

In 2025, two RCC pathfinders were launched in Greater Manchester and the South East of England. Early evaluation highlights the promising potential of the model: the pathfinders have fostered shared vision, responsibility, and ownership across their regions, shifting practice from reactive, competitive commissioning to a more proactive and collaborative approach. Building on this learning, the Government now intends to accelerate the rollout of RCCs and deepen their activity so that they become the future model underpinning the provision of foster care, children’s homes and secure children’s homes market.

From a fostering perspective, our current approach has focused on establishing ten regional fostering recruitment hubs. These are centrally coordinated teams serving clusters of local authorities, designed to streamline and enhance how potential foster carers are recruited, processed, and supported. They aim to increase the number and quality of foster carers, improve conversion rates, and reduce costs through shared resources and consistent practices.

²³ [The independent review of children's social care final report](#)

These hubs now cover over 60% of local authorities in England. Most hubs launched in summer 2024 and progress in recruitment is being made. As of December 2025, nine of the ten existing recruitment hubs have seen more approvals as a result of the programme than their expected baseline without programme investment. This is positive but it is clear that concentrating solely on the initial enquiry and application part of the process, is not generating the number of foster carers we need. The model has promise but has been too limited and cautious to make the impact needed.

To address this, we must accelerate and broaden our approach. While we aim to build on the successful recruitment practices within existing hubs, we recognise the need for a fundamental reset. Our plan will tackle the inefficiencies in the current hub system, where hubs act only as entry points before passing applicants to local authorities - creating fragmented processes and incomplete data.

We will accelerate and strengthen regional approaches to fostering so that children, families and carers benefit from more consistent, expert support.

2.1 Expanding and redesigning Regional Fostering Hubs

Building on hubs already operating across the country, we will push the concept beyond recruitment to encompass the entire assessment, approval process and on-going support for foster carers, applying lessons learned to create a streamlined and effective end-to-end approach. This refreshed and expanded model will mean hubs guide prospective foster carers from their initial enquiry through to full approval and provide ongoing support. Delivering the end-to-end process on the hub footprint will mean resource, skills and expertise from across individual local authorities can be brought together to ensure best practice approaches are at the core and likely enabling efficiencies to be delivered.

We will invest a further £12.8 million over the next 2 years for this end-to-end model so existing hubs can transition to an expanded approach and to provide the opportunity for other local authorities to join in new hub footprints. We want the new end-to-end model to deliver the following seven principles:

- targeted recruitment which focuses on driving up numbers and builds on recruitment good practice from best performing hubs;
- a single front door - one destination for all enquiries across a hub to remove any duplication and ensure the process is easy to navigate for prospective carers;
- a “journey guide” from enquiry to approval - responsive, dedicated support for prospective carers from first enquiry to decision;
- an established support network for carers - prioritising developing this and maximising the use of the foster carer’s and child’s existing network in doing so;
- regional assessment function - managed by the hub, utilising embedded social workers to make quick progress and decisions;
- enhanced regional data - many hubs already have regular pipeline data meetings with their partner LAs to track progress and identify delays, leading to faster

approvals. Under an end-to-end model, hubs will maintain full oversight of a regional data system that tracks applications from enquiry to approval;

- ongoing, post-approval support - a regional offer of training and support that is consistent across the hub.

We will use these principles as the vehicles to deliver new and innovative models of fostering.

Local authorities will continue to hold statutory responsibilities for children in care and will make decisions (as now) about specific placements. By regionalising the forecasting and commissioning functions under RCCs, and getting the economies of scale of fostering hubs, we will realise the benefits of collaboration across local boundaries. We will combine this with the reassurance that social care expert decision makers will continue to make care planning decisions and match children with the most appropriate homes for their needs.

Across the expanded hub programme and wider fostering programmes, we will need to monitor progress against national targets. We want all hubs to be delivering at the level of the best performers. We will introduce a new performance framework so that hubs are both clear on expectations on data collections and accountable for outcomes and continuous improvement. The data that the Department for Education will collect from hubs will include data of the fostering pipeline from enquires to approvals.

We will also put in place mechanisms for best practice sharing, so what works is shared across the country for others to learn from. We will also encourage hubs to partner with non-profit independent fostering agencies in order to speed up and improve the approval process. For example, a hub may partner with a high-performing local non-profit IFA to run their approvals process.

We are already working with existing hubs to iterate the end-to-end model and develop the vital delivery detail that sits underneath the seven principles set out above to make the end-to-end concept a reality. Existing hubs that are expanding to this model will begin implementation from April 2026.

In parallel, we will share the design specification for an end-to-end model with all local authorities and run information webinars ahead of launching an expression of interest in the Spring for non-hub areas interested in launching an end-to-end hub.

End to end support - a local authority's relationship-based model

“The local authority restructured their team so they have one experienced social worker who supports foster carers from their initial enquiry through to at least six months or a year post approval. They carry out all the steps - recruitment, home visit, training, assessment and then the ongoing Supervising Social Worker.

This ensures that the person responding to a prospective foster carer's enquiry is an experienced social worker with knowledge and experience to answer any queries they may have. For example, if a prospective foster carer has a question around allegations, they can draw on real examples to reassure them, rather than leaving them waiting for someone else to contact them or direct them to online resources.

The same social worker also supports the prospective foster carer through their training and completes their assessment. As a relationship has already begun, the assessment becomes far less daunting for the foster carers as they are sharing personal and vulnerable details with someone they already have met, welcomed into their home and begun to trust.

This model also strengthens matching as the social worker has a deeper understanding of the foster carer and they can make more informed decisions about which placements are likely to succeed, and which may not. This is particularly crucial for a foster carer's first child; if this is a poor match, there is a risk that the placement will not meet the child's needs and the foster carer could leave fostering altogether.

Social workers who support foster carers from their initial enquiry through to post approval are more likely to invest in the foster carer's overall journey. Knowing they will be working with them post approval inspires them to ensure the foster carer is as prepared as possible, leading to more stable placements and better outcomes for children.

Having foster carers who feel supported and valued by the fostering service and have a social worker they trust and have respect for creates stability. They are likely to feel confident in their skills and know they are able to overcome challenges with the support of their social worker. This in turn creates stability for children and young people in the care of foster carers. They are less likely to have placements end abruptly and have foster carers that are able to support with their needs, achieving the best outcomes for children.

After implementing this model, the local authority had 100% retention of foster carers and recruited 40 new carers over a two-year period.”

2.2 Preparing for Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs)

We will invest £10.8 million in Regional Care Cooperatives over the next two years; these are being developed to strengthen the way the care for children is planned, commissioned and created. The current system places significant pressure on individual local authorities, and RCCs are intended to support a more strategic, coordinated approach that improves sufficiency and stability for children.

Regional fostering hubs will form an important stepping stone as we build RCCs. Across the country we will:

- support local authorities to build capability for regional commissioning and support;
- encourage areas not currently participating in hubs to collaborate in preparation for future reforms;
- gather evidence and learning to inform the phased introduction of RCCs.

This approach will ensure regions can start their journey to create RCCs, laying the foundations for a more coherent and sustainable placement system. In the future, some RCCs will run the fostering hub in their area directly, while in others areas, RCCs may have a small number of hubs underneath them. Alongside this plan, the Government has published its [policy statement on RCCs](#).

Greater Manchester Regional Care Co-Operative

'The GM RCC has already delivered a strong set of early successes, establishing robust governance and launching several high-impact programmes across Greater Manchester. It has operationalised a regional Data & Demand Forecasting Platform, enabling more agile, needs-led commissioning and improved market shaping. Innovative initiatives such as Room Makers have expanded local placement capacity through new investment into foster-carer accommodation. In phase one of the scheme, 21 grants were awarded totalling £347,000 and creating ten new placements with a further 12 placements in the pipeline. The Fostering Recruitment Hub is demonstrating clear "green shoots", with enquiry-to-application conversion rates rising to 51% and enhanced approval figures expected, supported by successful ambassador-led engagement.

The RCC's collaborative approach is enabling strengthened commercial negotiations with providers to increase local access to placements. This is in addition to bringing together VCSE organisations and local authorities, establishing a foundation for sustainable, ethical market development and improved outcomes for children and young people across the region.'

3. Innovation that improves outcomes for children

Across the country, local authorities and partners are already breaking new ground developing approaches to foster care to better meet the demands of modern life. We want to support them to go further to meet children's needs more effectively, including for cohorts such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, whose distinct needs may require more innovative fostering arrangements.

We have been clear in the Families First Partnership (FFP) grant conditions that local authorities should ensure fostering plays an important role in wider prevention work. Using the right fostering approach at the right time can help ensure that children's and families' needs do not escalate.

Alternative forms of foster care can also enable children to stay with the same family more consistently or move safely from residential care into family settings when supported by strong wrap-around arrangements. We want to make these innovative models the norm, and we want to support local authorities and other relevant organisations to test new approaches, learn what works, and scale up those with strong evidence of impact.

Evidence from programmes such as Mockingbird shows that peer-supported networks can improve placement stability and carer retention. Local step-down models have also demonstrated how children can transition safely from residential to family care with the right support.

The sector has been championing innovation, and we will act on the learning and encourage more.

3.1 We will set up an Innovation Programme focused on outcomes

We will launch an innovation programme supported by a minimum investment of £12.4m over the next two years to scale and spread new and existing models of care. More details will follow, including information on how organisations can access funding. We also want to use the expanded end-to-end hub network, while RCCs will be at the centre of delivering this innovation programme.

Through this programme, we want to test different models of foster care that push at the boundaries of how we do things now to achieve better results for children. We want to better understand what models will improve outcomes for children through ensuring the right approach for a child depending on their circumstances and needs.

The programme will be outcomes focused with decisions on funding being based on the impact models will have on children's stability and the building of long-term relationships.

This could include models that increase the number of foster carer approvals, particularly among underrepresented groups, alongside approaches that strengthen placement and relationship stability through weekend and short-break arrangements. It may also involve models that support children to move safely from residential care into a family setting at the right time, or approaches that help prevent needs from escalating as part of a local family help service. We also intend to make greater use of supported lodgings to enable older children, where appropriate, to live more independently.

We are committed to working with the Ministry of Justice to increase the number of remand foster places as a credible alternative to custodial remand. In 2024-25, children remanded in custody accounted for 44% of the average custodial population for children. 62% of children remanded to youth detention accommodation did not subsequently receive a custodial sentence.²⁴ However, the experience of youth detention often causes significant disruption to their lives and severs vital community connections.

To address this, we need to expand specialist fostering provision so that children can be supported in family-based settings while awaiting trial, diverting them from custody wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so. Given the relatively small number of children in this cohort, a regional approach is essential. This will enable local authorities to forecast demand more accurately and share resources effectively. Therefore, where regional fostering hubs already exist, recruitment for remand fostering should be coordinated through these hubs to maximise capacity and ensure consistency.

The Ministry of Justice will also be investing a further £5 million in areas working in regional remand partnerships as upfront support for community alternatives to custody, including (but not limited to) specialist remand fostering. This investment will underpin joint efforts to grow the availability of credible community options for children who might otherwise be remanded to custody. Further details on this investment will be published in the coming months as part of wider plans to strengthen community based alternatives to custodial remand.

We will establish stronger evidence to identify what works, share learning between areas, and support effective models to scale. Local authorities, voluntary organisations and other partner agencies will all have a role to play as we support the system to innovate and improve.

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2025/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2025#use-of-remand-for-children>

South Gloucestershire Council's 'WAYPOINT'

'WAYPOINT is a therapeutically informed, multi-disciplinary service within South Gloucestershire Council's Fostering Service, created to prevent family breakdown, stabilise foster placements, and support safe reunification. Emerging from the earlier Therapeutic Parenting Pathway Project, it was designed as an intensive, flexible model that intervenes early and works relationally with children, carers, and families. Its approach blends trauma-informed practice, systemic thinking, and collaborative working with education, health, and statutory teams. As demand for support increased year on year, WAYPOINT grew into a broader integrated service, bringing together senior social workers, support workers, and therapeutic life story workers, all sharing a common mission of helping children remain safely within family environments wherever possible

The impact has been significant. In 2024–25 alone, WAYPOINT supported 49 families at high risk of breakdown and successfully prevented care entry, while also enabling four reunifications following short periods in care. Families report transformative outcomes, from the complete resolution of challenging behaviours within months to strengthened relationships and restored confidence in parenting. Foster carers and parents consistently describe the service as respectful, supportive, and life-changing, with 97% expressing high satisfaction and all young people reporting that they feel listened to and respected. The approach not only enhances outcomes but produces substantial financial benefits, with each prevented care entry or reunification reducing annual costs significantly, and residential step-downs saving over £276,000 per child per year. WAYPOINT stands as a compelling example of how therapeutic, relationship-based practice embedded within fostering services can deliver meaningful reform, improved stability for children, and considerable value for local authorities.'

3.2 Social investment

The Government is committed to mobilising the impact economy – including philanthropy, social investment and purpose-driven business – to support children's social care reform, including fostering. We are exploring how blended funding and social outcomes partnerships can drive a step change in fostering capacity and stability, helping ensure more children grow up in stable, loving family homes and reducing avoidable reliance on residential care.

We have already engaged a range of organisations interested in partnering with the Government to develop an investable approach that brings together public capital with philanthropic and social investment. The aim is to unlock additional resources and delivery capability to strengthen high-quality local authority and not-for-profit provision - particularly in areas of greatest need - and to support the growth and scaling of stable, supportive foster care that delivers better outcomes for children and young people. We will set out further detail on the proposed approach in due course.

4. New support for carers

Retention issues are intensifying the strain on the system. Alongside recruitment challenges, we are losing too many experienced foster carers. Support is vital and poor support is one of the main reasons foster carers leave fostering. This increases the sufficiency crisis and reduces the options available to services when matching children to families who can meet their needs. Foster carers consistently tell us they want to feel trusted, supported and valued.

Developed by The Fostering Network in the UK, Mockingbird has been our primary retention model, and it aims to replicate the support of an extended family network for foster carers and children. It creates a constellation of 6 to 10 satellite families supported by a hub home operated by an experienced foster carer. This model provides planned and emergency sleepovers, peer support, and training, creating a sense of community among foster families. Evidence shows this helps address issues affecting de-registrations and improves foster carer retention, placement stability and prevents spiralling alternative placement costs.²⁵ However, it only reaches a small proportion of fosters carers, and we want to ensure all foster carers can access enhanced support.

To improve the foster carer experience, we want to raise the bar on the level and type of support all carers can expect. This work will be informed by both current and future consultation and will include a new national training and support framework.

Some children in foster care may display challenging behaviour, especially if they have unmet or unrecognised needs, or have experienced trauma or grief. Challenging behaviour can then lead to crisis points in the relationship between carers and children, where physical violence can become a risk. As part of our upcoming work on standards and guidance, we will set out clearer expectations of how services should provide early support to prevent issues from escalating, as well how services should step in to support the child and foster carer to de-escalate the situation. This should include ensuring that the child's wider needs are being met, and that everyone in the foster family (including other children in the home) has the help and support that they need.

4.1 Training and networks

We will test and develop an enhanced training and support offer from 2027-28, drawing on learning from programmes like Mockingbird, to include peer support, training and supportive networks that build lasting relationships around children, while also allowing foster carers to take short breaks from caring responsibilities. We expect this would include:

- stronger evidence-based therapeutic training
- peer support and reflective practice
- clear training on allegations processes
- access to a strong network where care can be shared for short periods.

²⁵ [Mockingbird Fostering Network Evaluation](#)

In the interim, we will continue to rollout the Mockingbird constellations in 2026-27 with an investment of £8.9m in 2026-27, which we expect to deliver over 100 new constellations across the country.

4.2 Reform the handling of allegations

The safeguarding of children must be a top priority. In 2024-25, there were just under 3,000 allegations of harm against foster carers, and it is vital that all these allegations are investigated thoroughly and robustly. Abuse does happen in foster care, and this must be tackled. The voices and concerns of children in foster care must be listened to, taken seriously, and acted upon. This means that the right referrals must be made to LADOs about adults and to the local authority about children. In our work to improve training of foster carers we will place specific emphasis on ensuring carers understand forms of harm which children in care are particularly vulnerable to, such as sexual exploitation as well as on the allegations process itself.

At the same time, we will strengthen the support that services should provide during an allegation and to ensure fairness. It is essential to support foster carers through what can be a challenging and distressing process. We will also introduce a new expectation that foster carers continue to receive financial support during the investigation process, recognising the need to balance child protection with fair treatment of carers.

Our consultation '[Fostering reform: proposed changes to assessment and handling allegations of abuse](#)' sets out proposals to set out clearer distinctions between allegations and standards of care concerns, make the allegations process fairer and more transparent, and provide more effective support for children making allegations, as well as better support for carers who are facing an investigation.

4.3 Financial fairness and transparency

Foster carers do not foster for financial reward, but carers need adequate financial support to ensure that they, and the children in their care, are able to thrive.

We set the National Minimum Allowance (NMA), which should ensure that foster carers receive the financial support they need to cover the cost of looking after the child. We increase the NMA, along with tax relief, in line with inflation each year to ensure it keeps pace with the cost of living. But we recognise that there remains inconsistency across the country, causing deep frustration when carers feel they are performing the same role, but receiving different fees and other types of financial support.

We are calling for evidence on how we can achieve more transparency and consistency on the level of financial support that foster carers can expect. We are also committing to an in-depth study of foster carer finances to better understand variation in financial support and the impact that this has on recruitment and retention across the country.

We know that many local authorities offer substantial incentives and support for foster carers. Currently, roughly a quarter of councils offer some form of council tax discount and 16% offer a full council tax exemption. Councils across the country also offer foster carers wider incentives such as discounted or free parking permits and leisure centre access. We encourage local authorities to look carefully at the support they offer to carers and

consider whether these offers could be expanded. We will work closely with local authorities to understand and promote the full range of incentives they offer to carers.

5. A simpler rulebook that puts trusted relationships first

The rules that shape fostering in England need to change. Many of the current rules were designed decades ago and do not reflect what the evidence shows us children need most – trusted, lasting, loving relationships

If more children are to grow up in stable family homes, close to the people and places that matter to them, we need to change how everyday decisions are made – starting with the rulebook.

That is why we will rewrite the national fostering standards and guidance as well as care placement planning and review guidance and work with Ofsted to reshape inspection – so that trusted relationships become the main test of whether the system is working for children. This means both protecting children’s trusted relationships so they can integrate back into their family well when they are reunified and building new, lifelong loving relationships where needed. We will consult on the revised standards as soon as practicable in the coming months. This will encourage decisions about who can foster, how families are supported, and how placements are sustained to be guided by what strengthens a child’s relationships.

We will streamline guidance and standards wherever possible to simplify the current crowded landscape of documents which creates confusion and inconsistency in practice. We will also take the opportunity to dispel myths which have grown up in the system which influence practice in unhelpful ways which were never the intention.

Some of our reforms will involve legislative change. There are rules that, although designed to improve the system at that point, may now inadvertently limit the recruitment of foster carers.

But in many other areas the barriers are not in legislation at all – they are in myths, cultural norms, and entrenched practice. Over time, lack of clear and consistent leadership and uncertainty, has led services to act as though flexibility is not allowed, even where it already exists. This closes the door on good potential carers and creates unnecessary delay for families who want to help.

Common Myths That Discourage Potential Foster Carers

Myth 1: “I smoke or vape, so I can’t foster.”

Smokers and vapers *can* foster. Restrictions apply only for children under 5, parent-and-child placements, or children with respiratory conditions. This should not be used as a blanket reason to reject applicants.

Myth 2: “I have pets, so I’ll be ruled out.”

Most pets are compatible with fostering. Only banned breeds are prohibited; all others are assessed for temperament and safety. Pets can often be a positive presence for children.

Myth 3: “I’m single - I won’t be accepted.”

Relationship status is *not* a barrier to fostering. Suitability is based on the capacity to provide a safe, nurturing home.

Myth 4: “You must own your home.”

Renters, social housing tenants and those in housing associations can foster, subject to relevant permissions and a stable tenancy.

Myth 5: “I have a disability, so I won’t meet the criteria.”

Most disabilities do not prevent fostering. The key consideration is whether the applicant can meet the child’s needs with appropriate support.

Myth 6: “I’m too old to foster.”

There is no upper age limit. Applicants simply need to be over 18 and physically able to care for a child.

Myth 7: “A criminal record means automatic rejection.”

Minor or historic convictions do not necessarily prevent fostering.

Myth 8: “You must drive to foster.”

Driving is not required. What matters is access to reliable transport to support the child’s routines and appointments.

By rewriting the rulebook – across standards, guidance, and inspection – our aim is clear: a fostering system where trusted relationships are the organising principle, where carers are supported rather than constrained, and where every child has the best chance of growing up in a family that understands and believes in them. This is the foundation we will build on as we reform fostering for the future.

In updating the standards and guidance we will have a strong focus on:

5.1 Recruitment of carers

5.1.1. Making fostering assessments child centred and consistent

In the year ending 31 March 2025, 6% of enquiries at fostering services progressed to the application stage, despite the hard efforts of many social workers.²⁶ Such low conversion rates are deeply concerning, which suggests we need to improve the assessment process and do more to embed best practice.

Learning from the ten existing fostering hubs shows that applicants are more likely to progress from enquiry to approval when the recruitment process involves the following features:

- Timely, responsive applications that maintain momentum and make applicants feel valued;
- consistent and reliable points of contact that support trusted relationships;
- clear and transparent information about timescales and commitments required;
- early and open conversations about what fostering involves, including financial support, to build confidence;
- flexibility that supports personal circumstances and life events;
- good matching and ongoing support for placements;

We need to do more to address inconsistent practice which puts potential carers off. Prospective carers often face unnecessary or inflexible barriers that discourage them from continuing. Many of these perceived barriers stem from misconceptions about who can foster, or from inconsistent practice between services. We hear of people being discouraged because they work full time, had past financial difficulties, have minor health conditions, or are in therapy. Some are told - incorrectly - that they must be married, own their home, cannot vape, or cannot foster if they have an old and irrelevant conviction. We also hear of assessment practice that can be overly intrusive.

In reality, fostering is open to a wide range of people who can meet children's needs and pass proportionate checks.

²⁶ [Fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 - GOV.UK – underlying data Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates](#)

We will put a carer's ability to build trusting relationships at the heart of assessment decisions. We will also make clear that children's needs are diverse, and recruiting a broad range of carers improves matching and therefore stability.

5.1.2 Speeding up recruitment without reducing safety

Assessment times vary widely. Ofsted data shows only 41% of LA approvals are completed within 6 months, compared to 61% for independent fostering agencies (IFAs). Nearly 29% of LA approvals take 8 months or more, while only 18% of IFA approvals take that long.²⁷

We know that longer assessment and response times can discourage applicants. In The Fostering Network's 2024 survey, fostering services reported this as a main reason for withdrawing from the application process following initial enquiry.²⁸

Assessments need to move quickly – while remaining safe – so that children can be found family homes sooner and are not placed in residential care unnecessarily.

Adoption assessments take six months – two months for stage one, and four months for stage two. We will set an expectation in our guidance that fostering assessments should not exceed six months.

As part of this work, we are consulting on a proposal to remove the requirement to use panels in the approval and review process, and to ensure that Agency Decision Makers are held to account for the decisions that they make, underpinned by strengthened guidance and standards. These will set out that effective quality assurance should be embedded within the assessment itself, rather than in a single set-piece panel meeting at the final stage.

5.1.3. Improving recruitment quality and the experience for applicants

By setting clearer, more ambitious expectations on services, we are setting a higher bar for recruitment and assessment practice to recruit more high-quality carers.

The standards will apply to all fostering services; local authorities, independent fostering agencies and by extension of the local authority, to hubs.

The standards will set clear expectations on the quality of service that every prospective foster carer should receive and that services should meet to recruit the right number of carers. The standards will cover topics like:

- regular development and review of local recruitment strategies;
- applicant focused initial contact;
- responsive and prompt home visits;
- effective training to prepare for fostering;

²⁷ [Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates](#)

²⁸ [State of the Nation 2024, The Fostering Network](#)

- buddying / peer mentoring;
- targeting new and under-represented groups to encourage them to consider becoming a foster carer;
- continuity of staff support and assessors.

The standards will also strengthen expectations on data collection and quality assurance.

5.2 Trusted relationships through foster carers and their networks

5.2.1 Raising expectations on foster carer peer networks

Every parent relies on trusted people to help raise their children. Foster families deserve the same – time with familiar adults who can form the wider network – the village around the child.

Fostering is rewarding but demanding. Burnout is a major reason that carers leave. The Fostering Network's State of the Nations' Foster Care report found 33% of former carers and 53% of those considering resignation cited poor wellbeing. When carers struggle, care can break down, causing distress for children.

Children tell us traditional 'respite care' often fails. Breaks are often with carers they don't know, leading to disruption – and are sometimes far away from the child's home. Research and direct experience show children want care from people they know and trust. In most families, networks help to spread the pressures of raising children. Fostering should be no different.

Some providers are already demonstrating there are better ways to support foster carers in ways which are sustainable and avoid negative impacts on children. The Mockingbird model supports the creation of networks who know the child and family and can provide support on a regular basis. The Weekenders scheme approves carers who maintain ongoing relationships with specific children and take care of them for short periods regularly over time. More widely, there are different initiatives which use peer networks to help carers support each other and give children a sense of community. But the use of these promising approaches is uneven across the country, meaning inconsistent experiences for foster carers and children.

New standards will set clear expectations for services to build these types of networks everywhere – linking foster families locally so children and carers can rely on each other. Our innovation programme will also provide an opportunity to support the expansion of these peer network initiatives.

“Fostering community in a service” – how local authorities can help to create community

“The local authority mapped out all their approved foster carers and used this information to allocate supervising social workers caseloads of 10-12 foster carers within the same area. Supervising social workers were paired with colleagues supporting foster carers in close proximity, enabling them to work collaboratively and develop a shared understanding of each other’s caseloads.

The structure allowed supervising social workers to connect foster carers with others in their area through hosting social events such as coffee mornings. These enabled foster carers to create natural connections and relationships with other foster carers. These relationships created opportunities for trusted peer support arrangements, such as short breaks and sleepovers. Having a strong support network is essential for foster carers’ wellbeing. It helps to relieve pressure by having someone who understands the challenges of fostering, offering support and helps them to feel valued. As a result, the local authority saw improved retention of foster carers and increased stability for the children and young people in their care.

Pairing supervising social workers together also created resilience within the service. Each supervising social worker was familiar with both caseloads making planned and unplanned easier to manage. Working in pairs fostered peer support, shared responsibility and reduced isolation among staff. This collaborative approach boosted morale within the service and improved retention of supervising social workers.”

5.2.2. Enabling carers to rely on their trusted networks

We hear from the sector that practice varies widely when it comes to foster carers using their own support networks day-to-day. Some are supported by services to rely on family members for help, while others face unnecessary hurdles.

Foster carers, who have already been through a thorough assessment process, should be trusted to make the best decisions for the children in their care. Services should ensure that carers’ networks can play a meaningful role - whether for regular support or in urgent situations.

New standards will set clear expectations for services to help carers identify and rely on their trusted networks. This will create consistent, familiar relationships for children and strengthen the support around fostering families.

5.2.3. Empowering carers to make decisions

One example of the entrenched myths within foster care is about delegated authority.

The Children Act (section 3(5)) already sets out that foster carers can take the decisions they need to safeguard the child and promote their welfare. Our existing guidance is already clear that foster carers can take day-to-day decisions about the children in their care, and that older children should have greater agency to make decisions about their own life.

Young person

“Everyone is in your business all the time. They should make rules adapted to the young person's age, such as when they are making decisions on what I can and cannot do. I should be given more choice in matters and take care of my own things and do things my way.”

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But too often, we hear that practice does not reflect this. Bureaucracy and risk aversion in care planning mean that children in care miss out on normal childhood experiences and feel like they are treated differently to their peers. Delays in decisions mean that children and young people are unable to sleepover at a friend's house, miss out on a school trip, or face lengthy delays in receiving approval for things like having a haircut. Because of this, foster carers often tell us that they feel like they lack autonomy and agency to make day-to-day decisions for children in their care and can feel undervalued as the experts for the children in their care.

Foster Carer

“Everything has to be run by my social worker first, who then has to discuss with child's social worker, then has to be discussed with managers and the time for them to implement the action depending on their diary availability.”

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We hear that services continue to use care plans to state what day-to-day decisions the foster carer can or cannot take. This is not in line with legislation; all day-to-day decisions are already assumed to rest with the carer, and services would need to set out a clear justification for any move away from this in the care plan and why it is in the child's best interest. We know in common social work practice this is often referred to 'delegated authority by default'.

We will make it explicit in our revised guidance and standards that foster carers can make day-to-day decisions about the children in their care, and will work with the sector to ensure that this is reflected in the reality of the everyday lives of children and carers.

5.2.4. Ensuring foster carers are always involved in key decisions about the child

Children in foster care are part of the carer's family, and their carers are often the adult(s) in their life who knows them best at that time. But too often, we hear that carers are not always included in the meetings where key decisions are taken about the children they care for.³¹ When carers are absent, decisions can be taken without the benefit of the most up-to-date, day-to-day insight into a child's life, and the voice of the child can be lost. This

²⁹ [From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers - Coram Voice](#)

³⁰ [State of the Nations' Foster Care 2024](#)

³¹ [2024 Independent Foster Carers Survey Report | FosterWiki](#)

can create safeguarding risks and lead to plans that do not reflect a child's current needs or circumstances. It can also strain relationships between children and the adults who care for them, particularly when carers are expected to explain or carry out decisions they had no role in shaping.

As well as being bad for children, foster carers tell us that being excluded from meetings and decisions are a major reason for feeling undervalued and disrespected by the system and is a reason why they decide to stop fostering. We must tackle this.

Foster Carer

“We should be treated with respect and as equals because we know the children and spend more time with the children than all the professionals”

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Our new standards and guidance will make it clear that the voices and views of foster carers must be sought in all reviews of the child's case, and to set stronger expectations that carers are involved in all key meetings about the child. We will also set out that meetings should not be designed in a way to exclude foster carer input – for example, designating them as ‘professionals’ meetings that carers cannot join.

5.2.5. Making it easier for foster carers to form trusted relationships with children

We hear that foster carers sometimes face barriers to forming natural relationships with children because of the administrative tasks they are expected to perform. We know that building these trusted relationships is so important to children.

Care Leaver

“I have a very good relationship with my foster carer as we have been able to understand each other and trust each other throughout experiences while me being in care. She has helped to support me when I have needed it and help me through difficulties during my time in care”.

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Recording information about what children do every day can make foster carer and child relationships seem too formal and unnatural. Too often formal processes have arisen around decisions which could safely be made informally by trusted carers.

New standards will reduce burdens for foster carers and ensure processes do not stand in the way of forming relationships.

³² [State of the Nations' Foster Care 2024](#)

³³ [From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers - Coram Voice](#)

5.3. Trusted relationships through the child's network

5.3.1. Promoting kinship foster care

Our ambition to build lasting, loving relationships around children is at the heart of social care reform. It is why we want to keep families together wherever possible and prioritise kinship care when they cannot. To support this, offering Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) will become a requirement for all children who may need to enter care. FGDM helps families identify how they can work together so children stay with birth parents or kinship carers – kinship carers include relatives or people connected to the child, whether that be a teacher or family friend.

We recognise that kinship foster carers are approved to care for a child with whom they have an existing relationship. Indeed, in some cases, the child will already be living with them. We will work with local authorities to stress that they should work collaboratively with the kinship foster carers to ensure that they are taking into account existing relationships and assurances, and using the flexibility they have to approve kinship foster carers even when they don't meet all of the national minimum standards.

In practice, this should make it simpler and quicker to approve kinship foster carers compared to other foster carers – this is vital to support and sustain existing care arrangements for children and not leave families in unnecessary periods of uncertainty.

We hear from kinship foster carers that some experience assessment processes that feel intrusive and ask questions that would not be relevant to people who have a relational history with a child.

We will go further in making it clearer to fostering services and teams where these flexibilities exist, and the importance of working in partnership with kinship carers who are a vital part of the child's support network. Our call for evidence [Fostering for the future: improving the foster care system](#) seeks to understand how these flexibilities are already being used, and how we can tackle any barriers to achieving this.

Kinship placements with people known to the child should be prioritised and acted on without delay. Our standards will reinforce this flexibility and make clear that relationships come first.

We recognise that there are a number of complex issues impacting how services identify and support kinship foster carers. We will consider the findings of the Law Commission, who are due to report on how to improve and simplify legislation on kinship care, as well as learning from the kinship care allowance pilots to ensure we strengthen the system in the right way and will incorporate this into fostering standards and guidance.

5.3.2. Promoting relationships with a child's trusted adults

Remaining with family or living with kinship carers will not be possible for every child, and for some, fostering will be the right option. In most cases, children will come into foster care for a period but will return to their family. Investment in family help should make this a reality even more often and is crucial that services protect and support children's relationships with family during their time in foster care to enable this. Even where children come into foster care for the long term. their links to safe, trusted adults – an aunt, a

school friend’s parents, a teacher they feel secure with – should never disappear. These relationships often determine whether children feel heard and supported and how they grow, achieve and thrive.

When children enter foster or residential care, family group decision making (FGDM) should identify who matters most to the child and how those people can crowd in to offer care – through visits, overnight stays, holidays and more. This is important for every child in care, but especially so for the majority whose plan is to be reunified with family rather than to enter long term foster care.

We will encourage fostering services to continue to seek out trusted adults for children beyond FGDMs, building on existing practice, such as our Family Friendly and Befriending and Mentoring (FFBM) programme which supports children in care and care leavers to identify and connect with important people in their lives.

Child in foster care

Expressed a desire that “as a looked after child, they be treated equally...[...] my foster mum choose who is safe for me to stay with, not having to have a DBS to stay with family”

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The fostering standards and relevant guidance will ensure the child’s voice about who is important to them at the centre of all services and that everyone in the system is laser focused on protecting those relationships.

Amy, the founder of ‘Messy Fostering’ and a care-experienced advocate who entered foster care at age 14, was fostered as a teenager and spent summers with her teacher, Jo, who stepped in to support her as part of that placement. Amy has said fostering “saved my life,” giving her stability, safety, and adults who helped her learn to advocate for herself. Through Messy Fostering, she uses her lived experience to challenge stereotypes about foster care and show how safe, supportive, but imperfect homes can make a profound difference.

5.4. Trusted relationships through practitioner networks

5.4.1 Multi-disciplinary support to meet diverse needs

Families are diverse and often face complex challenges. Our £2.4 billion investment in Families First is helping local authorities create integrated teams that work with the whole family, so support comes through the person they trust most.

Fostering services do not yet work in this way. Children and their carers often deal with multiple practitioners – social workers, supervising social workers, managers, IROs – each with limited time to build meaningful relationships. In 2024, 27% of children in care

³⁴ [The Big Ambition: Ambitions, Findings and Solutions | Children's Commissioner for England](#)

had three or more social workers in a year.³⁵ This undermines continuity and stability for vulnerable children. Services should consider how they can better understand and meet needs, commission accordingly, and check whether support is working. Our goal is simple: better-targeted help, stronger relationships, and improved outcomes for children.

Social work expertise matters, but many children also need mental health and SEND support, and rely on advice from schools and Virtual School Heads, and foster families often need practical and emotional support. Updated standards will make clear that services can design that support creatively – combining social work with specialist skills and listening to what children and carers say they need.

Young person

"I feel like a lot of my problems are a result of my mental instability. Unfortunately, I do not know where to turn to talk about my feelings. I have been on the waiting list for a psychologist from CAMHS for months now. Talking to a school counsellor wasn't helping anything as I felt like I was only digging up childhood trauma and the counsellor wasn't doing anything to help me deal with that. All she did was listen and even tear up on some occasions which made me rather angry, I don't need sympathy, I need help. After two years of counselling, I simply stopped turning up."

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5.4.2 Fewer, more meaningful relationships

Current legislation does not require foster carers and children to be supported by different social workers. In some situations, this separation is necessary, such as short-term placements or when a child has just entered care. But in many situations – particularly stable long-term placements – a single social worker could offer stronger relationships, and more consistent support, provided the family also has access to wider specialist help.

We want fewer, stronger relationships and more flexible support. We will make it clear in new standards and guidance that services should think flexibility about who supports children in care and foster families, prioritising trusted and stable relationships for children in how they design who provides support and how.

Foster Carer

"Trusting relationships for the siblings I care for were hardest to sustain where there was a high turnover of social workers and repeated reassessment of decisions already made. Each change required the children and I to retell their story, which disrupted emotional safety and stability. Where trust did develop, it was because individual practitioners took time to listen, were transparent in their communication, and demonstrated reliability in follow-through."

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³⁵ [Stability measures for children looked after in England: 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

³⁶ [From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers - Coram Voice](#)

³⁷ [Foster Carers Advisory Committee | CoramBAAF](#)

5.4.3 Advocacy

Advocacy is a crucial part of the care system and aims to ensure that children and families receive the support they need for stability. Foster carers should feel empowered to use advocacy to access the right support for the young person in their care.

Our standards and guidance will make stronger reference to the importance of advocacy within foster care, clearly setting out the ability of foster carers to make referrals directly to advocacy services on behalf of the children in their care.

Conclusion

This strategy sets out a clear, credible plan to reverse the decline in foster care sufficiency, strengthen support for foster families, and modernise the regulatory framework so that fostering works alongside everyday life. It proposes national action, regional collaboration, innovation in practice, stronger support for foster families, and a simpler rulebook that puts trusted relationships first. But reform cannot be delivered by Government alone. Children, young people, carers, social workers, fostering services, local authorities and experts across the sector all hold vital insight into how the system should change.

That is why, alongside this strategy, we are publishing a public consultation '[Fostering reform: proposed changes to assessment and handling allegations of abuse](#)' on the use of panels in foster carer recruitment and assessment and on the handling of allegations against carers. The consultation is an important opportunity to test our proposals, challenge assumptions, and ensure that reforms are workable, proportionate and aligned with what children themselves say they need.

We will soon publish a second more detailed consultation on new standards for fostering services and will want to work with children in care and care leavers, foster carers, social workers and wider practitioners, service leaders and more to ensure we set the right future direction for the system.

Some reforms will require deeper evidence gathering before decision are made, to make sure we get them right. That is why we are also launching a call for evidence '[Fostering for the future: improving the foster care system](#)' to gather examples of innovative practice, understand the flexibilities already being used across the country, and identify new ideas that could be safely implemented in longer time or through primary legislation.

This is a moment of real opportunity. We have set out a bold programme of action, backed by significant investment, to rebuild a fostering system that works for today's children and families. But this strategy is only the beginning. Through the consultation and call for evidence, we want to work with the sector to shape the detail of reform, ensure that changes reflect real world experience, and build shared ownership of the next chapter of fostering in England.

Annex A: Action Plan Summary

We will **use national levers to create more fostering places**. We will

- Launch a **national recruitment and awareness campaign** to encourage more people, from a wider range of backgrounds, to apply.
- Introduce **digital tools** to help potential carers apply and help targeting and monitoring
- Provide **£25 million in capital grants** to help carers create extra space in their homes

We will **strengthen fostering hubs and move to Regional Care Cooperatives**. We will:

- **Invest £12.8 million to expand and redesign regional fostering hubs** to support applicants from first enquiry through to assessment and approval and to provide ongoing training and support.
- **We will also invest over £10m million in Regional Care Cooperatives** and launch an EOI for the next wave of RCCs shortly.

We will **drive innovation** in the system. We will:

- **Launch a £12.4 million national innovation programme** to trial new approaches and share learning
- Exploring the use of a **social investment vehicle** to boost the use of social investment capital in the children's social care placements market, including fostering

We will **improve support for carers**. We will:

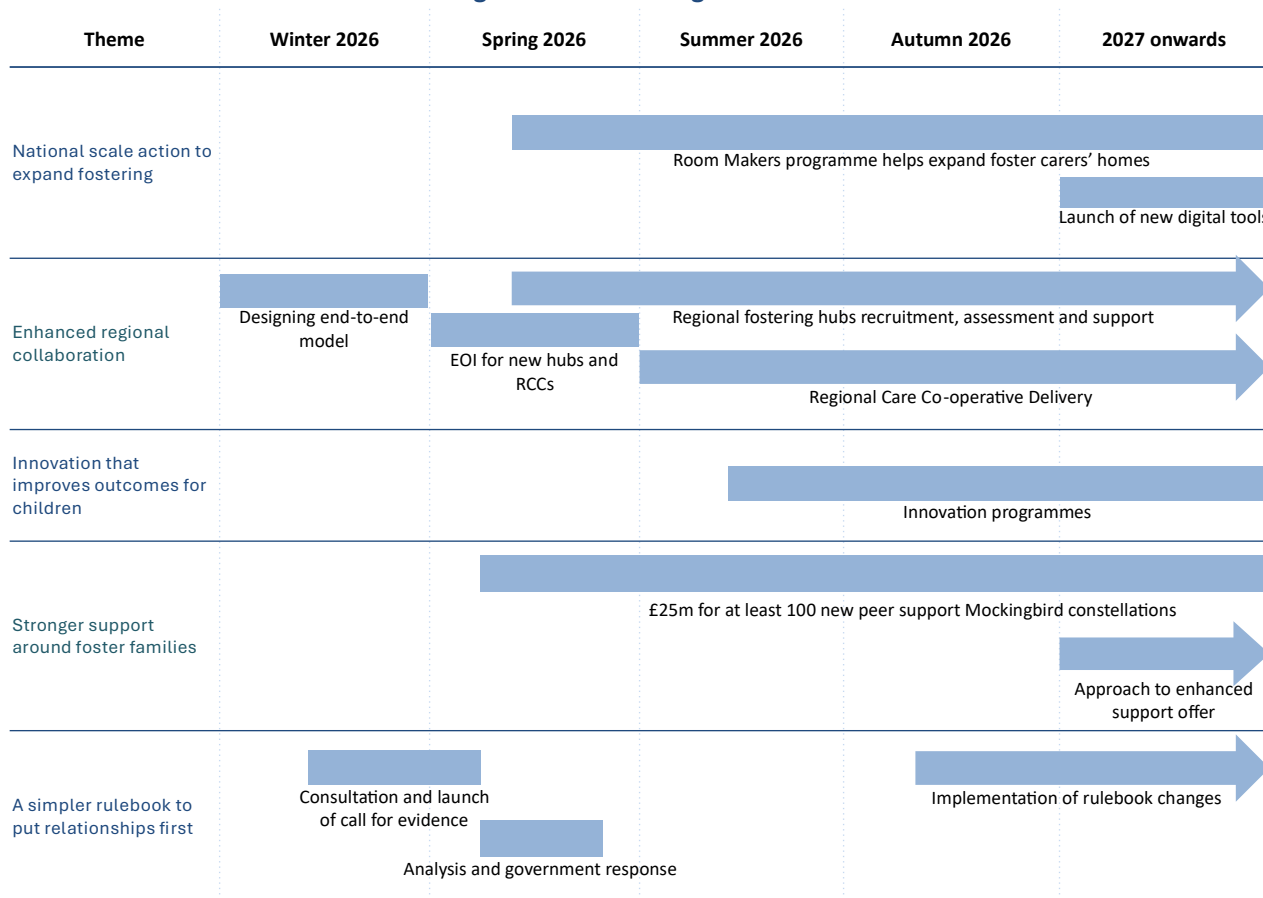
- Invest **£8.9m this year** to create over 100 new Mockingbird constellations across the country.
- Introduce a **national training and support framework**
- **Reform** the handling of **allegations**
- Conduct **research on pay and benefits** to improve financial transparency and understand how these impact retention
- Set out clearer expectations of how services should support foster families with challenging behavior.

We will **create a simpler rulebook that puts relationships first**. We will:

- **Rewrite national minimum standards for fostering**
- **Simplify and update fostering guidance**
- **Update the Care Planning, Placement and Review Guidance**
- Across these we will focus on:
 - Improving how we recruit foster carers, myth busting and driving consistency in assessment practice
 - Raising expectations for services to build peer networks, empowering carers to make use of their own support networks and make day-to-day decisions about children, and reducing administrative burdens which hinder relationship building
 - Promoting kinship and protecting children's existing trusted relationships
 - Encouraging multi-disciplinary approaches, fewer but stronger practitioner relationships and the use of advocacy

Annex B: Timeline

Fostering Reforms: 2026 high-level timetable



We are also planning a national communications campaign. Further details, including timings, will be confirmed in due course.

Theme	Activity	Timeline
National scale action to expand fostering	Planned national communications	TBC
	Room Makers programme helps expand foster carers' homes	Spring 2026 onwards
	Launch of new digital tools	2027 onwards
Enhanced regional collaboration	Designing end-to-end model	Winter 2026
	EOI for new hubs and RCCs	Spring 2026
	Regional fostering hubs recruitment, assessment and support	Spring 2026 onwards
	Regional Care Co-operative Delivery	Summer 2026 onwards
Innovation that improves outcomes for children	Innovation programmes	Summer 2026 onwards
Stronger support around foster families	£25m for at least 100 new peer support Mockingbird constellations	Spring 2026 onwards
	Approach to enhanced support offer	2027 onwards
A simpler rulebook to put relationships first	Consultation and launch of call for evidence	Winter-spring 2026
	Analysis and government response	Spring 2026
	Implementation of rulebook changes	Autumn 2026 onwards

Annex C: Further detail on target

Headline: By April 2029, we will create 10,000 more foster places, providing a foster place for every child who needs one.

Metric Rationale: 'Places' arguably provides the best single view of system capacity. It captures both permanent and short break care (including programmes such as Weekenders), and additional capacity within existing households.

Baseline: Using Ofsted trends in new approval and deregistration rates of foster households (converted into places), we project a continued decline in overall fostering capacity by 2029 without intervention. This forecast provides our baseline, from which our target of 10,000 additional places is set.

Demand for Foster Places:

It is difficult to estimate the true number of foster carers required. Our demand estimate is based on the following factors:

- A significant number of children currently entering children's homes could instead be placed in foster care;
- additional capacity is also needed to reduce the movement of children from current foster places into children's homes;
- further places are required to improve matching, ensuring children have more than one suitable foster carer when a placement is being arranged.

Combined, these factors indicate that 10,000 additional places will be needed by April 2029. This estimate contains uncertainty and does not yet reflect likely reductions in demand from wider reforms such as the Families First Partnership and kinship reforms.

Target: By April 2029, the goal is to create 10,000 more fostering places than are currently projected to exist, providing a foster place for every child who needs one. This target accounts for the expected decline in existing places and represents a substantial increase on the number of places as shown in the latest Ofsted data.



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