



Department
for Education

End-to-end Fostering Hubs

Programme booklet

March 2026

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Executive Summary

The Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme is expanding the number of fostering hubs in order to deliver a more joined up approach to recruiting, assessing, and supporting foster carers.

Building on the success of the existing fostering hubs now transitioning to a full end-to-end hub model, the next phase will go beyond a recruitment focused “front door.” It will cover the entire assessment and approval process, as well as ongoing, high quality support provided throughout a foster carer’s journey.

This document is intended to support groups of Local Authorities (LAs), Children’s Trusts, and non-profit Independent Fostering Agencies that wish to establish a new Fostering Recruitment Support Hub through an Expression of Interest (EOI). For the purpose of this document, we will refer to these groups as New Hubs.

This is one of four documents published to support applicants:

- **Programme booklet** – this document, outlining the minimum requirements and expectations that successful applicants must implement locally.
- **Application guide** – which sets out how to complete the application form, funding, and eligibility criteria.
- **Application form** – to be completed and submitted alongside the costed plan template during the application window.
- **Costed plan template** – to be completed and submitted with the application form during the application window.

All applicants must read these documents carefully before completing the application form.

Please note this document is iterative and may be updated following its initial publication. The Department will provide any pertinent updates to areas applying to become a hub as is necessary, as well as to existing hubs in the programme. The guide will be reviewed and revised periodically as required.

Introduction

1. Building on fostering hubs already operating across the country, we are now inviting interested new areas to apply to join the Fostering Recruitment and Retention programme as it enters an exciting new phase of delivery through an Expression of Interest.
2. On 04 February, we set out an ambitious programme of fostering reforms in *Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children*¹, reenergising a part of our social care system which has not been fundamentally updated since 2011. We recommend that applicants read this in full as it provides further detail on how we will transform the fostering system.
3. The fostering hubs programme is now moving beyond the recruitment-focused “front door” to encompass the entire assessment, approval process, and on-going support for foster carers. By applying lessons learned from current hubs, the new model will mean hubs guide prospective foster carers from their initial enquiry through to full approval, and then provide consistent, high-quality support throughout their fostering journey.
4. Local areas will continue to match children with foster families, so we expect any successful hub to work closely together on designing a service that works in the interest of foster carers and children, and optimises recruitment, retention and quality of care.
5. Our goal is clear: to urgently reverse the worrying trend of falling numbers of foster carers, to ensure as many children and young people as possible can benefit from family-based care. Increasing the supply of foster carers will not only improve outcomes for children but will also help ease pressure on local authority budgets by reducing reliance on high-cost residential placements.
6. Recent research underscores the scale of opportunity. Using a measure of children’s needs, studies showed that 20% of children in residential care had scores below the average for a child in foster care, and nearly 45% fall within the same range as children in foster care². 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 originally had foster care on their care plan³. This suggests that many children currently in residential care could thrive in foster care if the right foster

¹ [Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children](#)

² [Outcomes from fostering \(BERRI/NAFP\) May24 | Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers](#)

³ [Why do children go into children’s homes? - GOV.UK](#)

families were available in the right places.

7. We recognise the considerable talent and commitment within LA teams, and the shift to an end-to-end model for existing hubs and for successful new hubs joining the programme from the onset is about enabling that expertise to have greater impact through a single, coordinated regional function. Moving to a hub-based approach will require participating LAs to pool budgets and consolidate elements of their existing provision, allowing the establishment of a centralised team that can deliver services more consistently, efficiently and at scale.
8. By bringing resources, skills and specialist knowledge together in one place, we can reduce duplication, ensure best practice becomes the standard across the region, and create a more resilient and sustainable system for fostering families. Delivering the end-to-end process on a hub footprint will mean resources, skills and expertise can be transferred and shared across participating LAs. This will ensure best practice approaches sit at the core of the system and will likely enable efficiencies by diverting children from expensive children homes placements.
9. This document has been developed through a co-design process with existing hub LAs through workshops, a feedback form and one-to-ones. Co-design is a collaborative process that aims to help both central government and local partners bring successful reform to services for children and families. Applicants for new hubs are expected to align with the policies and approaches outlined in this document.

Strategic case for end-to-end

10. LAs are currently navigating significant reform across children's services - including the Families First Partnership programme and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities – in a context of wider local government reorganisation. In the context of a national shortage of foster carers, now is precisely the moment to refocus on foster care and reform the system in parallel to achieve better outcomes for children holistically. When children are unable to remain living within their family networks, foster carers play a critical role in providing safe, stable and loving homes. Ensuring that as many children as possible benefit from foster care will require a coordinated, system-wide shift in how we recruit, approve, and support foster carers.

A national shift toward regionalisation: Regional Care Cooperatives

11. The government's aim is to move towards a regionalised model for foster care recruitment and approval, with Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) as the preferred long-term structure. RCCs are being introduced in England to fix long-standing structural problems in the children's social care placement market by pooling

resources and coordinating regionally to better grip sufficiency challenges, drive up quality and deliver value for money through more effective market management. Under this approach, end-to-end fostering hubs will form the foundation of a coordinated, national response to foster carer shortages.

12. Over time, our expectation is that hubs will integrate within RCCs.

13. For example, an existing hub could be integrated as a contracted/hosted service under RCC governance while continuing day-to-day operations. An RCC may also straddle more than one fostering hub. Work is already underway in the Greater Manchester and the South East RCCs to integrate their fostering hubs to provide a regional hub model to drive conversion and consistency. To support this, an expression of interest will also be launched in Spring 2026 backed by over £10 million over the next two financial years, with the expectation to be able to support the setup of up to six new RCCs. Please refer to the application guidance and Section 7 in the Expression of Interest form for more information on RCCs.

Investing to transform the model

14. We are investing over £5 million in 2026/27 and 2027/28 to enable new hubs to join the programme and develop an end-to-end model. The investment for new hubs will allow regions to embed best practice, grow capacity and build the structures required for future RCC alignment.

Transformation of the hub concept

15. This is a transformational opportunity to reset our approach to foster care. By evolving the current hubs and onboarding new hubs into an end-to-end model, hubs will be able to adopt best practice, reduce duplication, and simplify processes – ensuring children receive the right care at the right time. For example, different LAs all have the same types of teams undertaking assessments and approvals but by centralising we can drive up innovation and best practice, as well as speeding up approvals.

16. The new end-to-end model expands on learning from existing hubs, where the focus has mainly been on marketing and initial engagement. While this has improved visibility and increased enquiry-to-approval numbers in many areas, conversion rates remain low and many foster carers report feeling unsupported during and after approval. Only 14% of initial visits currently result in approval, with prospective carers often disengaging during lengthy assessments, and approved carers leaving early due to isolation or lack of support during the existing process.

Why an end-to-end approach is needed

17. Under the enhanced model, existing hubs and new hubs joining the programme will take responsibility for the entire fostering journey - from early engagement through assessment, approval, training and ongoing support. This will:

- Enable a coordinated hub marketing strategy attracting more prospective carers and eliminate inefficiencies caused by fragmented local campaigns.
- Reduce handover and streamline processes, removing transition delays from the process.
- Create quicker, more consistent decisions, with hubs controlling timescales and delivering a single, standardised regional approach.
- Maintain continuous support, keeping prospective carers engaged and improving retention after approval.
- Harness regional expertise, bringing together skills and capacity from across LAs and enabling specialist support for specific needs of children where needed.
- Reduce duplication and administrative burden, making processes clearer for applicants and more manageable for staff.

18. As of February 2026, data suggests that in nine out of the ten existing hubs in the programme, more foster carers have been approved post-hub in comparison to when LAs were working individually. Existing good practice demonstrates what works: hubs with the strongest conversion rates prioritise relationship-building early on, maintain regular contact throughout the process, monitor performance effectively, and offer high-quality regional training and support. Several also provide out-of-hours support to meet applicants' needs more flexibly.

Benefits for children, carers and the system

19. End-to-end hubs will centralise resource and expertise, enabling stronger commissioning and more responsive support for carers. By bringing support for foster carers together at a regional level - such as mentoring, peer networks and creative placement stability solutions - the model helps prevent placement breakdowns, strengthen retention and improve outcomes for children.

In summary

20. The end-to-end model represents the next, more ambitious phase of fostering reform. Qualitative insights and best practice examples indicate it can deliver stronger engagement, more consistent support and improved recruitment outcomes so we now want to grow the geographical coverage. With the planned shift toward RCCs and significant investment now in place, this is the moment to embed a

streamlined, collaborative, regionally coordinated approach that meets the needs of children and carers both now and in the future.

Aims of end-to-end fostering hubs

21. We expect fostering hubs to demonstrate full commitment and support for this approach. This includes recognising the long-term benefits of a regionalised model and actively promoting the vision of end-to-end hubs to staff. Once an RCC is established, the fostering hub should move towards becoming fully embedded within its governance and operations.
22. Underpinning every step of this new approach is a steadfast commitment to the needs of children in care and securing bespoke forms of foster care (e.g. remand or 'step down' from residential care) where necessary. This approach is broader than recruitment. By optimising processes, reducing delays, and providing support to fostering households, hubs will build a sustainable system. This system will help ensure children are placed quickly into stable, loving homes where carers and services are well-prepared and equipped to meet children's needs.
23. To achieve this overall ambition, there are five key aims of end-to-end fostering hubs.
 - a) A holistic and scaled approach to recruitment - Fostering hubs will be designed to centralise the recruitment of foster carers, enabling LAs to pool resources, expertise, and marketing capability. By running multi-authority recruitment campaigns, using shared digital platforms, and organising joint and local outreach events, hubs will seek to boost enquiries, rapidly triage potential carers, and improve conversion rates from first contact to formal application. Hubs will also identify local groups who may have the skills and interest to foster (such as teachers or childminders) and target tailored messaging and offers towards them. They will also identify local gaps in matching for particular characteristics, such as ethnicity.
 - b) Streamlined enquiry-to-approval journey - Fostering hubs will function as a regional "front door", making it easier to find and access, providing consistent, high-quality engagement at every stage from initial enquiry, assessment visits and training to final approval. By aligning operational processes across LAs, hubs will create significant efficiencies and shorten timeframes, ensuring every prospective carer receives clarity on the process, benefits, responsibilities, and next steps. The model will also enable individual LAs to prioritise spending more time on support to fostering households, rather than the process for approval.

- c) Best-practice sharing and capacity building - Fostering hubs will facilitate sharing of evidence-based best practice across LAs both in the hub and more widely, enabling them to leverage proven strategies like digital marketing, referral networks, and community outreach. They will also provide professional development and coaching for hub staff, ensuring recruitment teams are equipped with the tools and training needed and the approach is consistent.

- d) Pre- and post-approval support - Beyond recruitment, fostering hubs aim to enhance carer retention by providing robust, ongoing support. Hubs should develop plans to consider the regional support offer informed by local consultation, but further national work is happening in slower time to review minimum requirements and expectations. This will include access to peer support networks, structured mentoring schemes and a regional training offer to help carers navigate challenges and build confidence. While this support is organised centrally, hubs will continue to work closely with LAs and their communities to enhance local links between carers. Hubs will provide regular training across all areas within the region, wellbeing resources, and opportunities for carers and the whole foster family to connect socially, reducing isolation and promoting resilience. Offering consistent, high-quality, whole-family support hubs will also enhance placement stability and ensure carers and foster families feel valued and equipped to provide exceptional care. As part of this, hubs should consider the aims of the Families First Programme and the [grant conditions](#) which state that LAs should use their fostering offer as part of their broader prevention approach.

- e) End-to-End pipeline and performance visibility – Fostering hubs will ensure transparent performance monitoring across the entire pipeline - from recruitment metrics (enquiries, applications, approvals) through to placement outcomes and ongoing support (retention, stability, diversity of carers). This data-driven approach ensures continuous improvement and accountability for both regional and national stakeholders. A Performance Framework will be developed which will set out requirements for data collection and performance monitoring.

Design specification

24. We want to encourage innovation and transformation in the delivery of end-to-end hubs which best meet local needs. However, to tackle the inefficiencies in the current hub system and to learn from this for new hubs joining the programme, we are setting minimum requirements to ensure a sensible degree of consistency across hubs. For hubs to drive recruitment of more foster carers, they need all the

levers to impact foster carer approvals. We will also monitor delivery and impact of the hubs to understand progress and inform continued rollout.

25. The funding arrangements for new hubs joining the programme are set out in the application guide. LAs should pool budgets and staff accordingly to meet the hub aims for the long term.
26. LAs should assign the appropriate staff to lead the transformation work and think through the delivery processes. Hub leads will form national networks, supported by the department to discuss delivery, best practice and share learning.
27. Hub leaders will be accountable for expansion and meeting clear standards, in line with departmental expectations, for both the volume increase and increasing the diversity of models of fostering. In practice, this means clear, measurable standards - such as ensuring a high percentage of enquirers receive a call within 24 hours, arranging an initial visit within a defined number of days, and matching applicants with a mentor early in the process. The ambition is clear: every prospective foster carer should experience a seamless, high-quality journey from enquiry through approval and beyond. We will monitor impact to understand progress in relation to new foster carers, retention, and pace of assessment, to meet the collective national target of creating 10,000 more foster carer places by 2029. Exact metrics will be agreed with successful hubs.
28. The hubs will be responsible for regional recruitment of foster carers in order that as many children as possible can live locally. Improved use of data and planning will mean that homes are created where children need them so they can stay in their schools, when that is best for the child.
29. To deliver a step-change in foster carer recruitment, we are seeking specific and stretching improvements. The minimum requirements in the table below set out the core expectations of the model for consistency and quality, while also adopting current hub best practice and developing these for new hubs where appropriate. These changes go beyond incremental adjustments - they represent a fundamental shift towards a regionalised, data-driven, and relationship-focused approach that prioritises speed, transparency, and support for prospective carers.
30. LAs will continue to hold statutory responsibilities for children in care and will make decisions (as now) about specific placements for children. 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. It is not a requirement for hubs to take responsibility for the supervision of

foster carers.

31. For the end-to-end model to function effectively, delivery should be organised through a single regional hub. However, we recognise that in some circumstances – such as in hubs covering a large geographic area - where initial home visits are coordinated, or where post approval support for foster carers is best delivered closer to communities – certain activities may be more appropriate to have a local element through the hub. Regardless of how delivery is arranged, the regional hub must retain full oversight and accountability for applying the end-to-end principles. There should be one regional hub model, but staff could be spread out across communities as opposed to multiple hubs being set up.
32. Hubs should embed meaningful consultation with foster carers, children in foster care and care leavers in the design of the regional model.
33. The table on the following pages sets out the minimum requirements for end-to-end fostering hubs, aligned with the government’s vision in *Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children*⁴. A key principle of this vision is that, to recruit more foster carers, hubs must have the levers to influence and deliver the entire recruitment process. This principle underpins the minimum requirements described.
34. During co-design with existing hubs in the programme, we gathered feedback on these requirements. Directors of Children’s Services, Assistant Directors, Heads of Service and hub leaders emphasised the importance of clarity and consistency in how the requirements are presented. Reflecting this, the table below is structured as follows: the first column outlines the minimum requirements; the second specifies what hubs must do to fulfil the minimum requirement, and the third identifies the areas where hubs retain scope for local variation. Please refer to the minimum requirements section when completing relevant sections of the Expression of Interest application form.

Agency decision makers and panel dates

35. To meet the end-to-end model, we are asking that assessment functions are delivered through the hub, which includes a regional panel function, which should be ready to recommend approval of foster carers being assessed by the hub. It is essential that the hub has control of all the elements of the recruitment and assessment process, so while there could be flex for local operation of panels, there must be regional control of elements such as process, training, clerking, frequency

⁴ [Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children - GOV.UK](#)

etc. We ask that hubs consider a regional model from initial visit to approval that aims to not exceed 6 months.

36. We cannot pre-empt the outcome of the recent Fostering reform consultation. Hubs may need to amend their approach to initial approval once the policy outcome of the consultation is final.
37. Current requirements on panels will continue to apply and will only change if fostering regulations are amended. The Department will set out the next steps on this in the coming months, following the conclusion of the consultation. LAs may wish to take advantage of regional panels for foster carer reviews, deregistrations etc. but this can be determined locally.
38. Within existing fostering regulations, only a fostering service can approve a foster carer – and the only types of fostering service are:
 - Local Authorities (LAs)
 - Independent Fostering Agencies
39. This means that hubs are not currently a fostering service and cannot approve carers in their own right. Participating LAs within the hub will need to delegate their approval to the lead LA (subject to section 101 of Local Government Act 1972), which says that LAs can arrange for other LAs to discharge their functions.
40. Therefore, fostering approval decisions for new carers will be arranged regionally via the fostering hub. Participating LAs should ensure that Agency Decision Maker (ADM) capacity is properly resourced to support timely and effective decision making. The hub will determine timescales within which decisions should be made.
41. Decisions relating to supervision of foster carers, such as reviews, de-registration, or changes to a carer's terms of approval will remain the responsibility of the supervising local authority, reflecting their ongoing relationship with the foster carer.
42. The programme's requirements in relation to the Panel and ADM steps in the fostering recruitment process are set out under the minimum requirement for 'implementing a Regional assessment function' on pages 21 and 22. Further detail on local areas' ability to tailor their design of arrangements is also provided in this section.

Minimum requirements

Minimum requirement	What hubs must do	Local variability
<p>Implement a regional recruitment model - Build on recruitment good practice from local areas (implement a relational approach: ongoing support to prospective foster carers and regular 'check-ins', timely pre-approval training package, strong local leadership, grip and use the data).</p>	<p>Regional recruitment model:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed a relational approach to working with prospective foster carers. • Involve foster carers in the design of the hub. • Comply with all statutory requirements and DfE guidance on managing enquiries, assessment and approval. • Transfer all local authority functions around managing enquiries, assessment and approval to the hub. • Establish a governance structure with appropriate senior local authority representation from across the region, and with a Director-level chairperson. • Design a governance structure with consideration to plans for Regional Care Cooperatives. • Appoint a hub leader. This leader is at an appropriate level of seniority to recognise their region-wide responsibility and scope of their management role. The hub leader is at the top of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing mix (digital, community outreach, targeted campaigns), prioritising under-recruited carer profiles. • Relational recruitment practices (regular check ins; proactive coaching; taster sessions; informal group Q&As). • Use of needs analysis tools and retention best practice resources (e.g., Fostering Network toolkit). • Embedding best practice recruitment examples such as out of hours contact for enquiry or foster carer buddy assigned from the point of completion of enquiry. • The design of the detailed staffing structure for the hub. • The design of the regional governance structure.

Minimum requirement	What hubs must do	Local variability
	<p>a line management structure that includes all staff working on enquiry, assessment and approval functions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear, accessible information and a welcoming response; treat enquirers fairly and promptly. • Ensure the recruitment process is as timely as best practice hubs, aiming for initial visit to approval being less than 200 days and initial visit to approval conversion rates of over 25%. • Word of mouth is still one of the strongest recruitment techniques so hubs may wish to establish local and regional marketing. Hubs must have sight of and influence over all communication and marketing activities across a region through a locally designed governance and management structure. 	
<p>A single front door - One destination for all enquiries across the hub (to remove any duplication, all LAs direct to the hub in terms of local websites, comms materials).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish the hub as the single destination for all enquiries in the region. • Send all enquiries received by local authorities to the hub. All local authority marketing material, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The communications and marketing strategy for their region, including the type of communications activities and distribution of marketing spend • As announced in Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children, DfE are exploring a

Minimum requirement	What hubs must do	Local variability
<p>Data is tracked in full through the recruitment pipeline.</p>	<p>including websites, events and social media, direct prospective foster carers to the hub.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One regional intake channel (web/phone/email) routing all LA enquiries to the hub; eliminate duplicate handling so LAs discontinue their recruitment work and this is done centrally from the hub, including running local events. • Establish robust information sharing agreements between LAs in the cluster, consistent with Working Together guidance and the DfE data strategy. 	<p>longer-term piece of work to make digital improvements to the fostering recruitment process – so local fostering services are encouraged to take steps to align with government data, digital and technical standards (refer to Performance Framework section for relevant links to these standards) to provide a seamless digital customer experience, rather than investing in new digital solutions at this time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DfE will develop digital tools, informed by capacity and user needs that streamline the recruitment and onboarding of prospective foster careers and hubs will integrate with this work when ready in 2027. • Following the launch of the national communications campaign, hubs will receive support to ensure their regional front door is aligned with and integrated into a national campaign.
<p>A dedicated consistent “journey guide” from enquiry to approval -</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide dedicated support to prospective carers from first enquiry to approval through a named 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the journey guide role is managed, including assigning to foster carers, caseload and tasks.

Minimum requirement	What hubs must do	Local variability
<p>Responsive, dedicated support for prospective carers from first enquiry to decision (e.g. regular check-ins, buddying/coaching support). This can be delivered by an assigned “journey guide” professional (e.g. a recruitment office, peer mentor or social worker), responsible for the customer relationship.</p>	<p>individual, responsible for the foster carer relationship.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver pre-approval training that prepares carers to support and safeguard children in care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How journey guides’ role will work with prospective foster carers, such as through check-ins, assessment support and panel preparation. • Offer blended learning and consider assessment routes (online modules; evening/weekend sessions; observation with children or roleplay). • Journey guides could provide support at targeted points in the recruitment and assessment journey where data shows that there is the highest drop-out of prospective foster carers.
<p>Establish a support network for carers - maximise use of the foster carer and child’s existing network and link applicants with any respite offers, or others in the child’s network to establish a lasting support network.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide every foster carer with a network of support, maximising the foster carer and child’s existing network, and connections with other foster carers. • Provide training and support to the support network that best meets the child’s needs. • Formal buddying schemes; link applicants to experienced carers early; structured observation/shadowing opportunities in local areas. This should be within proximity of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement Mockingbird or alternative peer support model (constellations; hub home; planned respite) to strengthen retention.

Minimum requirement	What hubs must do	Local variability
	<p>carers. Hubs may wish to run pop-up peer support groups to encourage networking within individual local areas opposed to regionally.</p>	
<p>Regional assessment function - Regional assessment function managed by the hub, utilising embedded or temporary social workers to make quick progress and decisions. Improved training and support offer to keep carers engaged.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver all foster carer assessment functions within the hub. • Regional approval and quality assurance arrangements that deliver approvals across the whole region in a timely way. • Comply with all statutory requirements and DfE guidance for assessment and approval. • Work towards a target of initial visit to approval in less than 6 months and an initial visit to approval conversion rate of over 25%. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staffing and design of the assessment team in the hub, e.g. some hubs may wish to establish a pool of Independent Social Workers or use mobile assessment teams. • Resourcing of the ADM role and panel membership. • Consideration to assessments should be informed by Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children. We cannot pre-empt the outcome of the assessment consultation but ask that hubs consider a regional model that aims to not exceed 6 months. Hubs may need to amend the approach to initial approval once the policy outcome of the consultation is final.
	<p><u>Panel requirements:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A regional panel makes recommendations for approval across the region – regardless of ‘home’ LA for the carer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel membership, e.g. representatives from each LA, hub-employed panel members, members of Regional Adoption Agency panel etc.

Minimum requirement	What hubs must do	Local variability
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel structure, selection, training, clerking and scheduling must be controlled and determined by the hub. • Hubs set panel meeting frequency to meet demand for processing applications without additional delay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel location(s) and clerking (as long as standardised by the hub) • Who takes on the role of the Panel chair • Locality operations – if more practical, panels might be arranged to service a sub-section of a hub’s constituent LAs. We advise that localities should cover at least four LAs in order to benefit from efficiencies. The standards and approach should still be set and overseen by the Hub and shared with DfE in submitted plans. • Panel oversight of deregistrations, reviews – it is recommended that these functions sit at regional level to take advantage of regional panels. However, this can be determined locally. • LAs may also choose whether to continue running local panels to oversee kinship care, or move that to a regional footprint as well.
	<p><u>ADM requirement:</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resourcing of the ADM role, e.g. multiple people on a rota, one (or more) ADMs full-time in the lead LA etc. N.B. if using a rota system, applications must be reviewed in the most

Minimum requirement	What hubs must do	Local variability
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions about carer approvals are taken via a regional ADM – regardless of ‘home’ LA for the carer. • Any review of decision-making by ADM happens via hub mechanisms and not within the carer’s “home” LA. • Hubs determine timescales within which ADM decision must be made and monitor and report against these. 	<p>timely way and must not be assigned to the “home” LA’s ADM.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locality operations - if more practical, the ADM function might be arranged to service a subsection of a hub’s constituent LAs. We advise that localities should cover at least four LAs in order to benefit from efficiencies. The standards and approach should still be set and overseen by the Hub. • Establishment as an IFA – hubs may choose to set up as an Independent Fostering Agency in time, to become a fostering service that can approve carers itself. This will not meet the timelines required for go-live but could be a future commitment.
<p>Enhanced regional data - Hub maintains full oversight of regional data to track applications from enquiry to approval.</p> <p>Monitor progress against activity and targets, based on volume, conversion rates and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a regional performance dataset tracking volume, conversion, timeliness, equality impacts, and safeguarding concerns from enquiry through approval which will meet the requirements set out in the Performance Framework. • Align with DfE data & digital strategy (improved case management usability; actionable insights; safe sharing). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider data collection and delivery intelligence (e.g.; cohort characteristics; training attendance). • We will work with hubs to set individual hub targets that feed into national expectations throughout the costed plan design process.

Minimum requirement	What hubs must do	Local variability
timescales contributing towards the national 10,000 target.		
<p>On-going and post approval support – To address retention issues and support individual LAs, hubs provide a regional offer of training and support that is consistent across the hub.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a consistent offer of training across the region that enables foster carers to best meets the needs of children. • Hubs are not required to provide supervision to foster carers after approval, this will remain with the LA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint training calendar (regional); advanced modules (e.g. therapeutic parenting; cultural competence; trauma informed training; digital learning; mentoring/peer supervision; retention incentives). • Where training happens in person, dates should be scheduled across the region to still bring local foster carers together in their communities. The regional offer will ensure more consistency removing the postcode lottery of support depending on where a foster carer may live. • Harmonisation of fees and allowances for foster carers. We recognise competition will continue amongst LAs whilst fees and allowances are not aligned so you may wish to standardise a regional offer.

Third sector involvement: non-profit independent fostering agencies

43. Independent fostering agencies (IFAs) now provide 45% of mainstream fostering households and 48% of filled places⁵. 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 long⁶.
44. We want to encourage LAs to consider forming partnerships with third sector non-profit organisations in the design process to enable better collaboration across the region to promote the best outcomes for children. By forming partnerships, hubs can co-ordinate their approach to private provision more effectively. This will mean they can plan and purchase support from third sector organisations, using collective negotiation to improve value for local government, and ensure that care meets the needs of children.
45. Whilst we welcome non-profit IFAs joining the programme, the lead applicant for new hubs applying to join the programme must be a Local Authority or Children's Trust.

Case study: RCC - IFA collaboration in the South East

*Home and Future*¹ Regional Care Cooperative has worked closely with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) across the South East, ensuring their voices and expertise are central to their work. IFAs have actively contributed to regional provider events and workshops, sharing lived experience of the challenges they face and offering practical, solution-focused insight to inform system development.

Home and Future has also been part of the Digital Innovation in Fostering programme led by Now Foster, working alongside IFAs and wider partners to explore how technology can improve foster carer recruitment and matching. This has included sharing work on evidence-based tools that support effective home finding for children and young people.

The South East plan to engage IFAs in the design phase of an end-to-end model.

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

⁶ [Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates](#)

46. DfE will organise workshops to share evidence of best practice and learning from third sector non-profit organisations which may inform end-to-end hub design. Examples of collaboration with non-profit IFAs could include the following:

- Messaging in recruitment marketing - positive and largely speaking to the key motivations for foster carers (i.e. to help a child), avoiding negativity both about the wider care system and about each other (LA / IFA).
- Timely communication with each other of when recruitment marketing will take place.
- Prospective foster carers should be supported to find the fostering agency or local area that is right for them.
- Recruitment should focus on new foster carers in order to offer greater choice for children, and not on encouraging existing foster carers to transfer from one agency to another, be it a hub or third sector IFA.
- Where a hub or non-profit IFA decide a particular enquirer might be better approaching a different fostering agency, they should encourage them to do so, so as not to lose them to fostering and they should record that this has happened to feed into evaluation data.
- A non-profit IFA could form part of the central hub or run the approval process, for example.

47. All funding agreements and contracts will be between DfE and the leading hub LA. Should you wish to enter a partnership with non-profit IFAs, DfE can support to ensure the appropriate governance and inspection frameworks are in place.

Case study: RCC - IFA collaboration in Greater Manchester

To address sufficiency challenges in children's social care, the Greater Manchester Regional Care Cooperative (RCC) has expanded the fostering programme to include recruitment, retention, utilisation, kinship, and provider collaboration. This expanded programme is being codeveloped with local authorities, foster carers, young people, and providers to ensure reforms are grounded in lived experience and frontline insight.

In November 2025, the RCC hosted a largescale IFA Fostering Summit in Manchester, attended by over 60 representatives from IFAs, local authorities, Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP) and the RCC. The summit focused on the core barriers impacting fostering across GM, including recruitment and retention challenges, partnership behaviours, referral pathways, and data sharing limitations.

The session created space for honest and collaborative discussions across all stakeholders on effective joint working, areas of challenge and future opportunities. A jointly developed Action Plan emerged from the event, setting out collective priorities for improvement. Key areas include the approach to placement searching and matching, data transparency to understand local supply, development of a step across from residential pathway and joint development/ engagement events.

This Action Plan will be formally endorsed in March by the GM Sufficiency Board and NAFP and will become the Provider Collaboration workstream within the RCC's expanded fostering programme. This ensures the momentum and commitment generated through the Summit is carried forward through a structured, accountable work programme.

Leadership, staffing and governance

48. Each hub should be led by a senior Hub Leader appointed by the participating LAs.

This leader must operate at a level that reflects the regionwide remit of the hub and be empowered to oversee all hub fostering functions. The Hub Leader should hold direct line management responsibility for staff involved in enquiry handling, assessment, and approval, ensuring consistent culture, standards, and practice across the region. Hubs should also maintain a real time understanding of all regional fostering marketing activity, with Hub Leaders being consulted on local authority plans early enough to influence their direction and ensure alignment.

49. Regional hubs should design staffing structures that meet the specific needs and context of their area. While models may vary, each hub must have direct

management responsibility for staff delivering core functions such as enquiry management, assessment, and approval. Staffing arrangements should support efficient workflows, high quality assessments, and coherent practice standards across the region. When developing these structures, hubs should also consider how their operating model will fit with emerging plans for Regional Care Cooperatives.

50. Each hub must have a formal governance structure that provides strategic oversight and accountability. Hub governance should be chaired by a Director of Children's Services (DCS) and include senior representation from every member local authority. All authorities involved must commit to working collectively to grow the number and quality of foster carers across the region, rather than prioritising improvements within individual local boundaries. Governance arrangements should facilitate shared decision making and provide oversight of performance, workforce planning, and the delivery of consistent, high quality fostering services.

Kinship care

51. 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. 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.

52. We will work with LAs 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.

53. LA leaders are best placed to determine workforce structures based on local need. As part of end-to-end hub planning, kinship care practice should remain within an individual LA but approval of kinship foster carers could happen in the hub process. LAs should have flexibility⁷ to ask regional fostering hubs to provide training and

⁷ Kinship statutory guidance states that *when making decisions about kinship foster carers, the fostering panel should not make negative recommendations solely based on prospective kinship foster carers not meeting the NMS for fostering during the assessment. As outlined in MBC & Ors [2018] EWFC 4214, the deciding question should be: 'Is the proposed placement in the child's welfare interests?' If the placement aligns with the child's best interests, then the prospective kinship foster carer should still be considered for*

support services to kinship carers within the region which may form part of the local kinship offer. LAs should refer to the [Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities](#).

Performance framework and data collection

54. Generating robust evidence on end-to-end fostering hubs will be critical for informing key policy decisions and building the evidence base for full national rollout.
55. There will be performance targets set with local areas to support our ambition to deliver 10,000 additional foster places by April 2029. In practice, this means we will set clear, measurable standards and monitor impact in relation to new foster carers, retention of foster carers, as well as the pace of assessment, to support our overall ambition to transform the sector.
56. We will work with successful hubs to set individual hub targets that feed into national expectations.
57. Agreement to participate in end-to-end hub delivery also requires agreement to provide regular data to DfE, enabling LAs and the department to monitor progress in real time. In addition, participating hubs will be expected to work with DfE to utilise existing data collections and identify approaches which minimise burden on LAs. This is essential for transparency and accountability, particularly to understand how the performance of every hub is contributing to the overall national target that by April 2029, we will create 10,000 more foster places.
58. Specific monitoring requirements and modes of collection will be finalised (working with hubs) and set out in a Performance Framework ahead of delivery. At this stage, we anticipate collecting data on key milestones in the fostering recruitment pipeline such as enquiries, EOIs, initial visits, application starts, panels, approvals, and ongoing support offers.
59. In preparation for the future rollout of digital solutions, hubs should ensure they take steps to align with government data, digital and technical standards to provide a seamless digital customer experience.

approval to foster the child, and then they should be supported by the fostering service to attain the standards.

- At a minimum, this should include:
 - [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.2](#)
 - [Service Standard - Service Manual - GOV.UK](#)
 - [The Technology Code of Practice - GOV.UK](#)
 - <https://standards.education.gov.uk/standards>
 - www.gov.uk/service-manual
- Other relevant standards may include:
 - [Customer Relationship Management \(CRM\) | Find and use standards](#)
 - [Identity Management B2C | Find and use standards](#)

Approach to funding and assurances

60. Funding will be provided to successful hubs via section 31 grants in two separate payments; details will be confirmed in the MoUs. The lead hub LA will be responsible for financial reporting and assurance processes. See funding section in the application guide for more information.
61. The Minister is keen that additional future funding streams will be funnelled through hubs where it is legally and commercially viable. This will likely include additional funding from a government investment to support home adaptations through Room Makers, and our Fostering Innovation Programme to scale and spread new and existing models of care.
62. Evaluation requirements will be set out in the MoU once agreed with DfE.
63. There will be ongoing engagement between DfE and hubs throughout the delivery phase of the programme. This includes ongoing engagement with the delivery partner and DfE Team which will help with the early identification and management of any delivery challenges. DfE will monitor delivery through the data collection as referenced above. This will be supplemented by ongoing engagement such as regular conversations or visits.
64. The lead LA will complete financial reporting including an annual certificate of expenditure (signed off by S151 officers) and an interim statement of grant usage at mid-year on behalf of participating LAs in the hub.
65. It is essential that LAs develop robust sustainability plans to ensure the end-to-end hub model becomes fully embedded. These plans should outline how hubs will maintain core functions and secure ongoing resources and funding.

Legal position

66. The end-to-end programme will not involve changes to primary legislation or require LAs to change their delivery in a way that is inconsistent with primary or secondary legislation. However, we do encourage innovation and transformational thinking when designing end-to-end hubs and welcome feedback where statutory requirements may prohibit this in practice. LAs should seek their own legal advice during the development of a final delivery plan, including on the matters of any partnerships with non-profit IFAs. All funding agreements will be between DfE and the leading hub LA.

Ofsted

67. We are working with Ofsted to explore how inspection will continue to have proportionate oversight of fostering functions as we develop end-to-end fostering hubs, this includes thinking about future inspection arrangements. We will work with Ofsted to ensure that participating local authorities are able to develop services in line with government CSC reform whilst ensuring that children continue to be safeguarded. Guidance on how Ofsted inspect current LAs with an operating hub can be found in this link: [Inspecting local authority children's services - GOV.UK](#).

Next steps

68. The detail set out in this document as of March 2026 articulates the department's policy for end-to-end fostering hubs, and we will update this in future if necessary.

69. As part of the design process, LAs must include time to consult foster carers on a proposed regional model, particularly on the element of on-going support.



Department
for Education

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