



Department
for Education

Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme: New Hubs

Application Guide

May 2026

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Executive summary

The Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme is increasing the number of hubs in the programme, to deliver a stronger, more integrated approach to recruiting, assessing, and supporting foster carers.

This application guide provides information for groups of Local Authorities (LAs), Children's Trusts and non-profit Independent Fostering Agencies interested in establishing a new end-to-end Fostering Hub through an Expression of Interest (EOI).

We know there are not enough foster carers in the right places, with the right skills and receiving enough support to meet the needs of all children who could benefit from foster care. Increasing the number of foster carers will enable better matching of placements and lead to better outcomes for children.

By supporting local areas to adopt an end-to-end hub model, we can expect several benefits: more approvals; fewer drop-outs as prospective carers progress through the process; greater consistency in regional practice and strengthened workforce capacity. The model will also help ease pressure on local authority budgets by reducing reliance on costly residential provision.

Building on the success of existing Fostering Hubs who are also now moving to end-to-end delivery, the next phase will extend beyond a recruitment focused "front door" to encompass the full assessment and approval process, as well as ongoing, high-quality support throughout a foster carer's journey.

Thank you for your interest.

Submission details

This application guide is one of four documents published to support bidders. Bidders must read and use these documents in full. These are:

- **The application guide** – this document sets out the background, funding and eligibility criteria.
- **The application form** – this document must be completed and submitted alongside the costed plan template within the application window.
- **The costed plan template** – this document must be completed and submitted alongside the application form within the application window.
- **The end-to-end programme booklet** – this document sets out the strategic case for end-to-end and minimum requirements that successful bidders must implement in their local areas.

Please read all these documents carefully before completing the application form.

We also strongly encourage all interested bidders to read [Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children](#) and the [Regional care cooperatives policy statement](#) published in February 2026 which sets out our ambitious programme of Fostering Reforms and for Regional Care Cooperatives.

How to apply

- The application period will open on 26 March 2026 and will close at midday on 29 May 2026. No extensions will be granted, and late or incomplete submissions will not be considered.
- The Department will hold two market engagement sessions to brief interested areas on the application process and timelines for completion. Please see the indicative timeline on page 5 for the dates of these sessions.
- Before submitting an application, please contact fostering.programme@education.gov.uk to confirm the lead LA and/or Children’s Trust who will be submitting the application, as well as the names of all LAs and Children’s Trusts within the proposed cluster. The Department will then provide indicative costings to support completion of *Section 6: Value for money* in the application form.
- Any applications that are incomplete or do not meet the eligibility requirements will be rejected and not evaluated further.
- Email fostering.programme@education.gov.uk with your application form and costed plan template (and any annexes) by the deadline.

Indicative timeline

Key indicative dates for the application process are set out in the table below:

Milestones	Dates (subject to change)
Expression of Interest opens	26 March 2026
Expression of Interest closes	Midday 29 May 2026
Market engagement sessions	14 April 2026 (14:00 – 15:00) 28 April 2026 (14:00 – 15:00)
Deadline for submitting clarification questions	15 May 2026
Bidders notified of outcome	June 2026
Grant letters issued to successful bidders	By July 2026
DfE grant funding ends	31 March 2028

Key indicative dates for successful bidders to develop a Fostering Hub are set out in the table below:

Milestones	Dates (subject to change)
Successful hubs notified	June 2026
Successful hubs begin implementation	July 2026
Hubs expected go live date	30 September 2026 ¹
First Section 31 grant issued to lead area	Autumn 2026

Formatting and Completion requirements:

- Please complete all sections of the application form in Arial 12pt font.
- Do not alter the structure, layout or formatting of tables.
- Bidders must answer all applicable questions.
- Please adhere to any word limits specified in each section. Any text over the word limit will not be scored.
- Provide appendices only where explicitly requested in the form. Any attachments that have not been requested will not be scored.

Who can apply

The programme is open to all Local Authorities (LAs), Children’s Trusts and non-profit Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) that are not already operating as hubs in the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme.

All areas that are applying must meet the following essential criteria:

- LAs, Children’s Trusts and non-profit IFAs must be named in only one EOI application. Any applications that include an area that has been named in another application will be deemed non-compliant. Where duplication occurs, all affected applications will not be considered further.
- All LAs, Children’s Trusts and non-profit IFAs must have a signed partnership agreement to proceed with the application. An annex to confirm agreement is included in the application form.
- Multiple hubs may operate within a Regional Care Cooperative (RCC) where the RCC covers a large number of local areas or a large geography. In all other cases, the Department expects RCCs and hubs to be fully aligned with those included in the RCC application (e.g., strategic authorities).
- Bids must include a minimum of four areas. Any consortium made up of fewer than four areas will not be eligible to apply.

¹ For *question 4: organisation and governance* in the application form, bidders who demonstrate clear and credible evidence that their hub will launch and go live by the end of September 2026 will be eligible for a score of up to 5 for this question. All other bidders who demonstrate they are able to go live later than September 2026 will score lower than the above, but still an acceptable score.

- Local areas previously in a Fostering Hub or withdrawing from an existing hub are not eligible to apply (see separate section on page 7).

The lead bidder within the cluster must meet the following essential criteria:

- The Lead Bidder must be a LA or Children’s Trust.
- The Lead LA or Children’s Trust must not be in any formal intervention with the Department or Ofsted for children’s services.

Clarification process

During the EOI Bid window, the Department will not enter directly into conversations with bidders about their bids outside of this Clarification Process. This does not include initial contact to enquire about total amount of available Funding, as set out in the Funding Arrangements section on pages 10 to 12.

Bidders may seek clarification about any aspect of the EOI, documentation or requirements that have been asked of them. You can do this by sending your clarification question to fostering.programme@education.gov.uk up until the clarification deadline of 15 May 2026. All questions will be anonymised and shared, along with an answer, to all eligible bidders via email. The Department aims to respond to all questions within 5 working days.

If you feel a clarification question should remain private, please indicate this in your response. The Department will review your question and if they are in agreement, a response to the question will be shared with you privately. If not, an opportunity will be provided to reframe your clarification so that it can be anonymised or for the clarification to be withdrawn.

Delivery partner support

Interested bidders will receive support from the Department’s delivery partner for the fostering programme as part of the application process. They will provide challenge, independent oversight and practical support. This offer includes:

- Guidance and advice to help hubs develop an end-to-end operating model aligned with the minimum requirements set out in the programme booklet.
- Engagement with senior leaders, such as Directors of Children’s Services, to support understanding of the application process and its expectations.
- Feedback on draft versions of the EOI documentation, including the costed delivery plan; and
- Supporting local areas to explore and shape the design of the end-to-end model, drawing on learning from existing hubs and wider programme experience.

For bidders that go on to be successful, the delivery partner will offer implementation support in the period leading up to ‘Go Live’. This support includes providing advice on

governance arrangements and working group structures, coaching for key leads, and transition planning until full transfer of all fostering recruitment and assessment functions is complete.

Once the Department has been notified of which areas intend to apply to become a Fostering Hub the delivery partner will contact the Lead LA or Children's Trust to confirm their support offer and to offer an initial meeting to establish ways of working.

Local areas previously in a Fostering Hub or withdrawing from the existing programme

Any local areas that have previously withdrawn from an existing fostering hub participating in the programme, as well as any local areas that intend to withdraw, are not eligible to apply to establish a new Fostering Hub during this application window. Local areas that have previously withdrawn are requested to contact fostering.programme@education.gov.uk should they wish to discuss this further.

Existing hubs participating in the programme should determine the most appropriate approach for reintegrating local areas back into the hub model where necessary, with support from the Department as needed.

Non-profit Independent Fostering Agencies

The Department also encourages LAs and Children's Trusts to consider forming partnerships with third sector non-profit organisations (IFAs) where appropriate to do so.

Examples of collaboration with non-profit IFAs may include, but are not limited to:

- Messaging and recruitment marketing - 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.
- 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.

All funding agreements and contracts will be issued between the Department and the lead LA or Children's Trust. The Department will support successful areas to ensure the appropriate governance and inspection frameworks are in place.

Regional Care Cooperatives

Regional Care Cooperatives were proposed in the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) published in 2022 as a response to longstanding challenges in the placement market.

In 2025, 2 RCC pathfinders were launched in Greater Manchester and the South East. The Department will separately be launching a separate EOI backed by more than £10 million to support the set-up of up to 6 new RCCs.

The Government's long-term vision for RCCs is that they will deliver high quality provision, on behalf of all LAs/Children's Trusts in their area, including delivery of the Fostering Hubs. The vision is for every local authority to be part of an RCC in the future.

By bringing these functions together within a single regional framework, RCCs represent the fullest expression of regional integration across children's social care placements, ensuring that sufficiency planning, commissioning and the delivery of fostering support operates as one coherent, joined-up system. As such our expectation is that Fostering Hubs would work across or within an RCC footprint, and that the Fostering Hub would work together with the RCC to support their overarching role in place sufficiency planning.

Local areas should decide the best approach for integrating the Fostering Hub services into the RCC. *Section 7: Regional Care Cooperatives (25%)* of the EOI form asks a question regarding this.

As part of the bidding process:

- Bidders that apply for both this EOI and the RCC EOI to be launched by the Department and are able to demonstrate clear, robust plans for aligning the two as part of their response will be scored highest for this question. The highest score bidders can receive for this question is a 4.
- Bidders that apply for this EOI and are able to demonstrate progress on developing an RCC and commitment to setting one up in the future will be scored lower than the above, but still an acceptable score.
- Bidders that do not demonstrate any plans to commit to an RCC will score a zero, which will mean their bid is rejected from the process.

Performance framework and data collection

By joining the programme, each successful hub will take on an exciting role in contributing to the national ambition of creating 10,000 additional foster places by April 2029, supporting children who cannot live with their birth families to grow up in loving, safe and stable homes. Successful areas will also play a vital role in strengthening the evidence base for Fostering Hubs by delivering the full end-to-end model and helping to demonstrate its impact at scale.

To track our progress towards delivering 10,000 additional foster places, we will be setting LA level targets and we will use those targets to hold Hubs accountable for delivering value for the additional funding and support they will receive.

Participation in end-to-end delivery includes a commitment to share regular operational and performance data with the Department. This data will enable both local areas and the Department to monitor progress in real time and support continuous improvement across the programme. We will also use this information and work with hubs directly to identify and roll-out best practice across the programme.

The specific data requirements, reporting frequency, and collection mechanisms will be shared with successful hubs and formally outlined in a Performance Framework ahead of the start of delivery.

Funding arrangements

Funding Overview

The Department has a budget of £4.1m for the 2026-27 financial year, and £1.6m in 2027-28 which is expected to support the establishment of up to four additional new Fostering Hubs. The funding envelope for each hub is determined by a needs-based methodology that reflects the scale and characteristics of its operational footprint.

In year 1 (2026-27), the funding envelope is made up of a variable figure, intended to reflect ongoing costs; a communications budget; a fixed cost element and an uplift to support one-off costs related to transformation. In year 2 (2027-28), the fixed element and uplift for one-off costs fall away, and the Department will provide funding equivalent to 50% of the remaining sum to support on-going running costs and a communications contribution. LAs and/or Children's Trusts are expected to pool budgets to meet the remainder of the costs of the Fostering Hub.

We will expect areas to account for their communications spend separately in line with government spending rules.

Basis of Funding Allocation for Hubs 2026-27

Funding is determined by the number of children looked after (CLA) within each participating LA and/or Children's Trust and incorporates factors such as deprivation levels, population size and levels of urbanisation, to ensure allocations reflect the differing levels of demand for local areas. As a result, Fostering Hubs will receive different funding amounts depending on both the number of LAs/Children's Trusts in their Hub, as well as the characteristics of each of those areas.

Funding overview FY 2026-27

Example – illustrative only

Region Name	Local Authority Metrics	Funding
LA 1	Various – LA dependent	£170
LA 2		£200
LA 3		£350
LA 4		£470
LA 5		£280
Comms budget	Various	£440
Subtotal		£1910
Transformation uplift	Fixed Percentage of Subtotal	£477.50
Fixed Cost	Fixed	£500
Total Funding		£2887.50

Funding overview FY 2027-28

Example - illustrative only based on example above

Region Name	Local Authority Metrics	Funding (50% of year 1)
LA 1	Various – LA dependent	£85
LA 2		£100
LA 3		£175
LA 4		£235
LA 5		£140
Comms budget	Various	£220
Total Funding		£955

Next steps

Once a proposal of the local areas that will form the Fostering Hub has been reached, the Lead LA/Children’s Trust should contact fostering.programme@education.gov.uk with their name and list of LA/Children’s Trusts who will be applying as part of their bid who will be in receipt of the funding.

The Department will then issue a funding envelope to support completion of the application form and costed delivery plan.

We encourage LAs/Children’s Trusts to confirm their proposed hub composition as soon as they reasonably can, to allow the maximum time to complete the bid with the funding available. As the funding envelope is calculated based on the local areas included within the proposed cluster, the funding will be revised if the composition changes. In such circumstances, please contact fostering.programme@education.gov.uk for updated costings.

Grant arrangements

The grant will be allocated to the designated lead LA or Children’s Trust within each hub via a Section 31 grant. Payments may be paused or withheld if satisfactory progress is not demonstrated against the milestones set out in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

The lead LA or Children’s Trust in the consortia will be responsible for grant funding and all reporting requirements set out in the grant funding agreement.

Memorandum of Understanding

The Department will also enter into a MoU with the lead LA or Children's Trust. The MoU will set out expectations for effective programme delivery and the requirements for managing public funding appropriately and transparently. It will also clarify roles, responsibilities and reporting arrangements to ensure the hub operates in line with programme objectives.

The MoU will be shared with successful hubs ahead of the start of delivery.

Minimum delivery requirements

The minimum delivery requirements for Hubs in the programme are set out in the programme booklet guidance. Please ensure you refer to these requirements when completing the application form and in particular *Section 3: hub delivery requirements*.

Evaluation process and criteria

Applications will be evaluated via the following process:

Stage 1 – Receipt and Eligibility

All applications must be received by the midday 19th June deadline. No extensions will be granted, and late or incomplete submissions will not be considered.

All sections are mandatory and must be completed for your application to be accepted.

Stage 2 – Evaluation

The assessment panel will evaluate each application against the Department's set requirements. The headings included within this section are listed below.

Each question and section has been allocated a weighting to indicate its relative importance to the subject of the application round.

To note:

Bidders will not be scored for question 1 as it is not assessed.

Bidders will be scored between 0-5 for questions 2 to 6.

For question 4, bidders who demonstrate clear and credible evidence that their hub will launch and go live by the end of September 2026 will be eligible for a score of up to 5 for this question. All other bidders who demonstrate they are able to go live later than September 2026 will score lower than the above, but still an acceptable score.

For questions 2 to 6, bidders must gain a score of 3 or higher for each section in order to pass the question. Applications scoring a 2 or less on any section will be disqualified from the process and will not be eligible for funding to become a Fostering Hub.

Bidders will be scored between 0-4 for question 7.

In question 7, bidders must gain a score of 2 or higher in order to be awarded funding. Applications scoring a 1 or below will be disqualified from the process and will not be eligible for funding to become a Fostering Hub. Areas that do not demonstrate any plans to commit to an RCC will be awarded '0' (does not meet the requirement).

The apportioned weightings for each of the sections are outlined below:

Section No.	Focus	Question weighting
1	Bidder details	N/A – not assessed
2	Existing partnership working	10%
3	Hub delivery requirements	30%
4	Organisation and governance	20%
5	Risk register	5%
6	Value for money	10%
7	Regional Care Cooperatives	25%
	Combined Total	100%

Scoring scale for section 2 to 6:

Responses to the questions will be evaluated on a scale of zero to five, as set out below:

Score	Assessment	Criteria
5	Excellent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The response demonstrates that the Bidder has a thorough understanding of the question and the relevant Statement of Outcomes requirements. • The response demonstrates that the Bidder can meet the relevant Statement of Outcomes requirements in full and to a high standard with evidence of how this will be done. • The Bidder has addressed the question criteria in full and has robust, comprehensive plans, processes and resources to deliver the relevant Grant activity and there are no omissions or concerns. • The response provides a high degree of confidence in the Bidder's ability to deliver the relevant Grant activity. • The Bidder's response also exceeds the requirements in some areas and/or introduces innovation which should bring added value / benefit to the Department/ Services/ Sector.
4	Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The response demonstrates that the Bidder has a good understanding of the question and relevant Statement of Outcomes requirements. • The response demonstrates that the Bidder can meet the relevant Statement of Outcomes requirements in full, with supporting evidence of how this will be done. • The Bidder has addressed the question criteria and has clear plans, processes, and resources to deliver the relevant Grant activity, and any omissions or concerns are very minor. • The response provides confidence in the Bidder's ability to deliver the relevant Grant activity.
3	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The response demonstrates that the Bidder has general understanding of the question and relevant Statement of Outcomes requirements. • The response addresses most of the question criteria and demonstrates the Bidder should meet the relevant Statement of Outcome requirements and any omissions and / or lack of evidence are not significant. • Any omissions in the Tenderer's response and plans, processes, and resources to deliver the relevant Grant activity are not significant. • The response provides adequate confidence in the Bidder's ability to deliver the relevant Grant activity.

2	Minor Reservations – Minor Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The response demonstrates that there are omissions in the Bidder’s understanding of the question and /or relevant Statement of Outcomes requirements. • The response does not address some of the question criteria and omissions or lack of evidence in the response raises doubts about Bidder’s ability to meet the relevant Statement of Outcome requirements. • There are some material concerns/omissions in relation to the Bidder’s plans, processes, and resources to deliver the relevant Grant activity. • The response provides a limited amount of confidence in the Bidder’s ability to deliver the relevant Grant activity to a satisfactory standard.
1	Serious Reservations – Major Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The response demonstrates that there are omissions in the Bidder’s understanding of the question and /or relevant Statement of Outcome requirements. • The response does not address some of the question criteria and omissions or lack of evidence in the response raises doubts about Bidder’s ability to meet the relevant Statement of Outcome requirements. • There are some material concerns/omissions in relation to the Bidder’s plans, processes, and resources to deliver the relevant Grant activity. • The response provides a limited amount of confidence in the Bidder’s ability to deliver the relevant Grant activity to a satisfactory standard.
0	Unacceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The response does not meet the requirement for the question and/or relevant Statement of Outcome requirements and/or the Bidder has not answered the question and/or the response fails to meet the relevant Statement of Outcome requirements. • The response does not comply or there is insufficient evidence in relation to the Bidder’s plans, processes, and resources to deliver the relevant Grant activity. • The response provides no confidence in the Tenderer’s ability to deliver the relevant Grant activity.

The score awarded for each question/section will be multiplied by the weighting to arrive at a weighted score for that question. The weighted scores will then be added together to give a total weighted score. Final scores will be worked to one decimal place.

Worked example:

Bidder	Question No.	Maximum Question weighting	Score received	Weighted contribution against overall total
Proposed Hub A	1	N/A	N/A	N/A
Proposed Hub A	2	10%	5	10%
Proposed Hub A	3	30%	3	18%
Proposed Hub A	4	20%	4	16%
Proposed Hub A	5	5%	3	3%
Proposed Hub A	6	10%	3	6%
Total		75%	18	53%

Scoring scale for section 7 (Regional Care Cooperatives):

Responses to section 7 will be evaluated on a scale of zero to four, as set out below:

Any areas that score less than 2 or do not demonstrate any plans to commit to an RCC will be awarded '0' (does not meet the requirement).

Score	Assessment	Criteria
4	Excellent – Very High Confidence	<p>The response is of an excellent quality and of a level of detail that provides a very high level of confidence that the bidder has the capacity and capability in the areas described in the response against requirements of the question.</p> <p>Compelling and relevant evidence is provided to support the response.</p>
3	Good – High Confidence	<p>The response is of a quality and level of detail that provides a high level of confidence that the bidder has the capacity and capability in the areas described in the response against the requirements of the question.</p> <p>Good, relevant evidence is provided to support the response.</p>
2	Satisfactory – reasonable confidence	<p>The response is of a quality and level of detail that provides a reasonable level of confidence that the bidder has the capacity and capability in the areas described in the response requirements against the question.</p> <p>Relevant evidence is provided to support the response and any lack of clarity and / or any missing evidence and / or detail is only minor.</p>
1	Poor – Not confident	<p>The response is of a quality and level that lacks convincing and/or relevant evidence to provide confidence in the capacity and capability of the bidder in the areas described in the response requirements against the question, demonstrating some misunderstanding and/or failing to meet the response requirements against the question in many ways and/or materially in one or more ways.</p>

0	Unacceptable	<p>The response fails to provide any confidence due to the bidders response being absent or incomplete and/or the bidder proposals are not relevant to the minimum requirements and / or the bidder has not understood the criteria set out in the questions and / or the Guidance document set out in the Specification and/or Contract at all.</p> <p>No relevant evidence is provided to support the response and the lack of clarity and the extent of missing evidence and / or detail is absolute.</p>
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Worked example for section 7 (Regional Care Cooperatives):

Bidder	Question No.	Maximum Question weighting	Score received	Weighted contribution against overall total
Proposed Hub A	7	25%	4	25%
Proposed Hub B	7	25%	3	18.75%
Proposed Hub C	7	25%	0	0%

Stage 3 – Moderation and Priority Scoring

To determine the final selection of successful bidders, the assessment panel will convene for a moderation meeting(s). The individual scores of each assessor will be reviewed, and the panel will come to an agreed single consensus score for each application, which will form the basis of the final outcome.

In the event of a tie, the Department reserves the right to prioritise applications which would ensure the largest geographical representation in areas that do not currently have hubs. We may also consider which bids would be able to support the largest number of looked after children and young people.

Following the moderation meeting(s), final scores will be agreed and we anticipate up to four of the highest scoring bidders will be awarded.

Where the number of successful applications exceeds the total amount of funding available, funding will be prioritised to the highest scoring bidders.

This means a bidder will not automatically receive funding, even if they score higher than a 3 in all questions.

Stage 4 – Issue Outcome Letters

Successful and unsuccessful letters will be issued to each bidder by July 2026. The named lead LA contact from each application will be notified of the outcome.

Stage 5 – Grant Award

Grant determination letters will be drafted and awarded by the Department following HM Treasury approval.

LA project teams must prioritise the completion and return of all annexes required for the grant offer letter(s). LA project teams must also sign and return the Department for Education (DfE) grant offer letter(s) promptly to ensure timely programme setup and progress.

Annex A: Mockingbird funding

An additional £1.4m is available nationally for successful Local Authorities/Children's Trusts to implement a first or additional Mockingbird constellation.

Mockingbird is an evidence-based model that provides extended family support and relationships for foster carers and children and young people in foster care, led by The Fostering Network.

The Department will provide each LA/Children's Trust with their Phase 1 fee (only applicable to those implementing a first Mockingbird constellation). This fee is payable to The Fostering Network.

An additional £40,000 per LA/Children's Trust to cover setup costs, staff costs and areas involved in the setting up of the constellation will also be made available.

Once the hub has successfully launched, the Department will provide the Phase 2 fee for first constellations who received Phase 1 fees. This fee is also payable to The Fostering Network.

A further £80,000 will be provided per local authority to cover ongoing running costs and costs associated with the key roles.

The Department will confirm exact arrangements to successful hubs about the process for contacting The Fostering Network to implement Mockingbird in their respective areas.



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