

SUMMARY FOR ELECTED MEMBERS

Part of the Foster Care Practice Guide

| Produced by Foundations, and commissioned by the Department for Education

This document provides a summary of the [Foster Care Practice Guide](#) and offers Elected and Lead Members a set of key questions to support delivery. These questions are intended to help Elected and Lead Members work with senior leaders in children's services to strengthen their local support offer for foster carers.

[Practice Guides](#) set out the best available evidence for leaders in children's social care to support effective practice and improve how services are commissioned, developed and delivered. They contain actionable key principles and recommendations for senior leaders based on the findings of a [robust review of existing evidence](#), which explored what works, for whom, and in what contexts.

Practice Guides aim to support local areas to achieve the outcomes of the [Children's Social Care National Framework](#). This Practice Guide relates predominantly to Outcome 4 of the Framework: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes. It also relates to Outcome 1: families stay together and get the help they need, and Outcome 3: children are supported by their family network.

INTRODUCTION

When children cannot live at home with their parents, or with other family or friends, foster care provides the safety, stability, and belonging they deserve. Foster carers make a vital contribution to the lives of children who require alternative care, whether in the short or long term.

The fostering system is facing significant challenges, and this Practice Guide has been developed during a period of widescale reform. These reforms aim to expand fostering nationally, enhance regional collaboration, scale innovation to improve outcomes for children, strengthen the support available to foster families, and create a simpler rulebook for fostering that puts trusted relationships first.¹ This Practice Guide can support this work by ensuring future developments learn from and build on the best available evidence.

¹ Department for Education (2026) [Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children](#)

This Practice Guide:

- Focuses on one specific aspect of fostering: the use of evidence-based interventions designed to strengthen foster carers' wellbeing, confidence, and skills. It is aimed at supporting non-related foster carers offering short- and long-term arrangements.²
- Primarily covers support for foster carers to provide the best possible care to children and does not attempt to cover every component of support children in care need to thrive.
- Does not include other types of benefits that foster carers receive, such as financial support, because we did not identify any evidence relating to these. However, we recognise that adequate financial and material support is essential to create safe and loving homes, enable people to foster, and ensure that a child's needs are met.

KEY PRINCIPLES

Key principles help to ensure that accessible, acceptable evidence-based support for foster carers can be effectively implemented. They draw out qualitative evidence on the views, experiences, and preferences of foster carers in the UK on how to engage and work with them. They also cover qualitative evidence on effective design and implementation of interventions for foster carers.

Key principle 1: Create a coordinated network of support for foster families.

Key principle 2: Ensure support is delivered by practitioners who are warm, passionate, and empathetic, and who approach foster carers as equal partners.

Key principle 3: Offer facilitated peer support, which is valued by foster carers as important for their emotional wellbeing.

Key principle 4: Support foster carers' own needs, enabling them to provide children with stable, loving care.

Key principle 5: Prioritise support that strengthens foster carers' capacity to understand and respond sensitively to children in their care.

Key principle 6: Provide structured support while allowing for flexibility and tailoring to individual needs.

Key principle 7: Help foster carers engage confidently with support by using a strengths-based, inclusive approach.

Key principle 8: Provide foster carers with opportunities to put theory into practice.

² The [Kinship Care Practice Guide](#) focuses on the specific needs of kinship carers, including kinship foster carers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations summarise the best-evidenced support and training for improving outcomes for foster carers and the children in their care.

RECOMMENDATION	STRONG EVIDENCE	GOOD EVIDENCE	PROMISING EVIDENCE
1. Provide foster carers with evidence-based multi-level support to improve a range of outcomes.	✓		
2. Provide foster carers with evidence-based positive child behaviour support to improve children’s behavioural outcomes.	✓		
3. Offer evidence-based training to support consistent foster carer-child interactions, to improve children’s development and wellbeing.		✓	
4. Provide foster carers with evidence-based self-care skills <u>and</u> positive child behaviour support to improve carer wellbeing.		✓	
5. Provide foster carers with evidence-based positive child behaviour support in a group setting to improve placement stability and permanence.		✓	
6. Offer foster carers evidence-based relationship-focused training to strengthen relationships with children.		✓	
7. Build evidence-based foster carer support networks to improve retention.			✓

STRONG EVIDENCE

- Meta-analysis of at least two randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental studies
- Low on risk of bias assessment
- Demonstrates effectiveness of the intervention(s).

GOOD EVIDENCE

- Meta-analysis or narrative synthesis of at least two randomised controlled trials and/or quasi-experimental studies
- Moderate on risk of bias assessment
- Demonstrates efficacy of the intervention(s).

PROMISING EVIDENCE

- One randomised controlled trial or quasi-experimental study
- Low or moderate on risk of bias assessment
- Demonstrates efficacy of the intervention(s).

Read the evidence ratings in full: <https://foundations.org.uk/how-to-use-the-practice-guides/>

KEY QUESTIONS FOR ENGAGING SENIOR LEADERS

These questions are designed to help Elected and Lead Members work with local leaders of children's social care to strengthen their local support offer for foster carers. They should act as prompts to aid conversations with local leaders on implementing this Practice Guide's recommendations and key principles.

How evidence-based and informed is the local support offer for foster carers?

The Practice Guide summarises the best-evidenced support and training for foster carers so they can continue to provide the stable, loving homes and attuned caregiving the children in their care require. It can serve as a starting point for local leaders to assess how well their current offer meets the needs of foster families. Strong leadership is essential throughout the implementation of support – from assessing population needs and selecting appropriate approaches to embedding them sustainably and maintaining quality.

Delivering well-evidenced support locally will improve outcomes and ensure that resources are directed to the most effective services. Local leaders should set out how their support offer has been designed, including how they have integrated evidence-based programmes that enhance foster carer wellbeing; provide positive behaviour support; promote positive child development and wellbeing; improve placement stability and permanence; strengthen carer-child relationships; and support foster carer retention.

While What Works evidence is a key part of the picture, a full range of evidence should inform the commissioning, design, and delivery of services to make the best decisions for children and families locally. Having a clear understanding of the demographics and specific support needs of local foster families is critical when designing the local offer.

The local offer should be reviewed regularly to reflect the evolving context and needs of foster families. Ongoing data collection and analysis should be used to monitor service effectiveness, identify emerging needs, and inform continuous improvement.

Local leaders should promote and provide access to continuous professional development to ensure practitioners' skills and knowledge remain current. An equipped and effective workforce is an enabler of the outcomes set out in the Children's Social Care National Framework.

Reflective practice, supervision, and feedback mechanisms should be in place to allow practitioners to learn from experiences and enhance service delivery. Refresher training on the latest developments in children's social care and child development should be embedded in ongoing practitioner education, with a focus on recognising and responding to children's evolving physical, emotional, social, and developmental needs, including those with additional or complex needs.

These efforts should connect to broader strategic goals, demonstrating how an evidence-informed approach supports the mission of improving outcomes for children in foster care and foster carers.

How do we ensure that foster carers are able to make the most of the support offer?

Local leaders should ensure that foster carers have meaningful opportunities to deepen their knowledge and develop new skills. They should also ensure foster carers are supported to put learning into practice, including by providing protected time to attend training and support sessions and for reflection, and to build relationships through access to peer networks.

It is essential that support is experienced as useful, acceptable, and accessible, as this underpins foster carer engagement and promotes the effective use of commissioned services. Evidence highlights that limited carer capacity is a common barrier to accessing support. Leaders should therefore consider how to create a system whereby carers have space to meet their own needs and to engage with support that is relevant to their family's circumstances.

Effective service design should also extend beyond interventions focused solely on the child or the carer, and instead adopt a whole-family approach. Supporting the wider household can reduce pressure on carers and help create a more sustainable fostering environment. Regular monitoring and feedback mechanisms should be used to refine local strategies, ensuring that support not only exists but meaningfully meets the needs of both children and carers.

Local leaders should build practitioners' and practice supervisors' understanding of the local support offer and its benefits to enable them to connect foster families to appropriate resources. Evidence shows this also improves foster carer engagement. Training and supervision can strengthen practitioner confidence in supporting foster carers and referring them to the appropriate services.

Practitioners should approach carers as equal partners and demonstrate warmth, empathy, and genuine commitment. Local leaders are instrumental in embedding strengths-based and inclusive practice, creating a culture that actively values the knowledge and skills of foster carers.

Although limited evidence was identified about what works for different demographic groups of foster carers and children in foster care, it is vital that the local support offer is culturally responsive. This includes recognising and valuing the cultural identities, beliefs, and experiences of both children in care and their carers. Cultural responsiveness requires authentic partnership with communities, awareness of how structural inequalities shape experiences, and a strong understanding of children's and carers' cultural contexts.

How do we work with other agencies to ensure foster carers get the help they need?

Foster carers require a broad range of support and access to multi-disciplinary practitioners to help them meet the broad range of children's needs. Local leaders working across the corporate parenting partnership should clearly define their organisational responsibilities and operate with shared values, common language, and joint commitment. This enables support for foster families to be efficient, responsive, and consistent.

By working closely with partner agencies, local authorities can ensure consistent messaging and promote a strengths-based, respectful, and compassionate approach across all practitioners working with foster families. Strong partnership working also supports more accurate matching of foster carers to the right support, helping ensure they are well equipped to meet the needs of the children they care for and increasing the likelihood that support is effective and perceived as valuable.

Local leaders should also identify and address structural barriers that may reduce support effectiveness. For example, inconsistencies in practice or frequent changes in the team around the child can limit carers' ability to put learning into practice. Leaders should work strategically across the corporate parenting partnership to nurture and develop a stable, confident workforce that supports consistent care-planning practices across all areas of a child's life. This includes promoting close collaboration between health, education, social care and voluntary-sector partners to deliver coherent, high-quality support for foster families. The prioritisation of multi-agency working is an enabler of the outcomes set out in the National Framework.

How can we use this Practice Guide to deliver wider children's social care reforms?

This Practice Guide provides local leaders with clear, evidence-based recommendations and key principles for delivering high-quality support and training to foster carers. By using this Practice Guide, local leaders can meet the outcomes set out in the National Framework and fulfil their statutory responsibilities, while ensuring that support is impactful and aligned with the needs of foster families locally.

While the National Framework underpins the vision for the children's social care system, this will be achieved through wider policy change and reform. This includes the government's commitment to strengthening support for foster carers outlined in the recent [Renewing Fostering](#) paper, as well as with the expectations set out in the [Family First Partnership programme](#), where foster care was highlighted as a key component of a whole-family approach.

The Practice Guide emphasises the importance of multi-level, multi-faceted support, tailored to the unique nature of the fostering role. This includes creating space for carers to focus on their own wellbeing, access peer support, and apply learning in practice.

It also highlights the need for support to be delivered by warm, respectful and skilled practitioners who value carers' expertise and work in a strengths-based, inclusive way.

As an Elected Member, you may wish to work with colleagues across Cabinet and with relevant partnership bodies – such as Integrated Care Boards, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Partnership Boards – to coordinate and strengthen the local offer for foster families.

By implementing this Practice Guide, local authorities can develop a cohesive and efficient support offer that meets the needs of children and carers and enhances carer-child relationships, leading to improved placement stability and improved outcomes. This Practice Guide provides the tools and evidence required to drive meaningful change, making it an essential resource for Directors of Children's Services seeking to strengthen local systems and deliver better experiences for children in foster care.

This resource is part of a set of publications linked to the Foster Care Practice Guide:

- Full Practice Guide: foundations.org.uk/toolkit/practice-guides/foster-care
- Quick summary: foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/foster-care-practice-guide-summary-guide.pdf

Find out more about the series of Practice Guides:
foundations.org.uk/practice-guides

We want to hear from local leaders who are engaging with the Practice Guides. Get in touch at practice_guides@foundations.org.uk