



NI Regional Fostering Service Statement of Purpose

Action for Children has been finding safe, loving homes for children who need them for 150 years. We are experts in finding the best possible match between children and foster carers. As we are smaller than many other fostering and adoption agencies, we can offer our foster carers and adopters high levels of training and support, and a friendly and personal touch. As a charity our commitment is to getting things right for children, not for shareholders.

Over 150 years ago, The Reverend Thomas Bowman Stephenson took the time to listen to homeless children living under the arches of Waterloo station. He listened. And we've been listening and taking action ever since. From one family home in Waterloo, the charity quickly grew to become the National Children's Home (NCH).

Today, as Action for Children, we provide a wide range of services across the UK for children and young people from 0-25 years. With 500 local services reaching 380,000 children, young people and families we are working in a community near you. But finding safe and nurturing homes for children through fostering, adoption, short breaks and residential care is still an essential part of what we do in the 21st century.

Northern Ireland

Action for Children has been providing services in Northern Ireland for children, young people and families since 2000. Today this includes early years; family support; work with youth homelessness including floating support and supported accommodation; support for young carers and young adult carers; and work to improve young people's mental health.

We have services across Northern Ireland working closely with all five Health and Social Care Trusts. In 2018/19 our services reached 11,400 children, young people and their families.

Fostering in Northern Ireland

At the heart of Action for Children Fostering in Northern Ireland is the well-being of the fostered children and young people, the foster parents and families, our staff and colleagues. We are a family centred service committed to providing safe and happy childhoods.

We use attachment theory and principles, and our knowledge of the impact of trauma on childhood development in our work to help children, young people and foster parents to make a meaningful emotional connection. Relationship based social work is a key method of working and achieving stability of relationships is a key outcome for children in our care. We are able to achieve this through the intensive support of experienced social workers with small caseloads, where there is low turnover of staff and consistent and stable relationships between foster carers and fostering social workers. Our Regional Fostering Service has been operating since 2006 and we provide placements for all five Health and Social Care Trusts.

Assessment, Support and Governance

All our placements are supported by an experienced fostering social worker who has received training in attachment and trauma. All our carers receive Thinking Therapeutically training which is regularly refreshed through our training schedule, support groups and supervision. This approach is one of the reasons we are able to sustain placements and manage complex placements. It is also why we have a stable staff and foster carer group, who are very much a whole team.

We provide our foster carers 24 hour support.

We assess and approve our foster carers via our own Fostering Panel. Our Panel is Independently Chaired and the majority of panel members are independent. Our current chair is Stephen Knox. Our carers are reviewed every year by the senior manager responsible for the service. Every third year this is replaced by a formal review with our Panel. Foster carers will also be considered at Panel to make changes in approval, in relation to specific issues, to consider concerns about performance or standard of care, and to review resignations. Panel makes recommendations to our Agency Decision Maker, Stacey Burnett. Our Agency Decision Maker is a senior manager who sits outside the operational line management structure for fostering. This is a UK wide role for all our fostering services which brings a specific benefit in terms of independent and consistent oversight allied to a culture of shared learning.

As part of our CHARMS database/recording system we use the Outcomes Tracker. This reviews five areas – Achievement; Health; Relationships; Safety; Social Engagement. These are reviewed on a six-monthly basis and the data/report is provided to Looked After Children reviews. The Outcome Tracker provides an invaluable picture of children and young people's well-being. We are also updating the Outcome Tracker when a placement ends, either because the child has moved on or has reached 18 years, as this provides a useful transition/overview report.

We are currently expanding our service offer and have employed a Fostering Support Worker to support young people age 16-25 years who are either preparing to live independently or have already made that transition. This will complement the work of the young person's Personal Advisor but will also aim to sustain the connection with the young person's foster family as they become young adults.

Placement Types

We deliberately recruit a diverse group of foster carers, with a range of skills and experience, from across Northern Ireland because we know that the placement needs of Trusts do not remain static. We aim to help the wider system and children who are in care by adding capacity and options to a care system where demand will continue to outstrip supply. Above all else this should help the search for the best possible match for each child. Depending on the availability of carers we will offer the following types of placement –

- Short term
- Long term
- Single child
- Siblings
- Children with disabilities
- 0 – 18 age range
- Harder to place teenagers
- Placements requiring a higher level of support
- Specialist placements for older teens who may be on the edge of or leaving secure accommodation or custody
- Planned short breaks
- Parent and child
- Emergency or short notice

Like the Trusts we often have very limited additional capacity which can lead to frustration for Trust social workers. We would encourage social workers to continue to contact us to discuss possible placements and we will continue to regularly provide Trusts with updates of available placements. We will also identify potential carers that are close to approval to assist planning for children. While the success of our service has come from planned and well-matched placements, we will discuss emergency or short notice placements. We have taken short notice placements in the past which have then become successful long-term placements, particularly when matching considerations have been part of an emergency placement process.

Many of our children go on to remain with their foster families after they turn 18. We manage payments to carers via the GEM Scheme and continue to provide support to our foster families – work for which we do not charge. We are also making use of volunteers to support our foster families and this includes supplementing short break support, providing child minding, and mentoring/befriending for children in our care.

Foster Carers

As we have already said, we deliberately recruit a diverse range of carers, both to provide the best possible match for children, but also because at Action for Children we are committed to diversity and inclusion as core values.

To be a foster care you need to be over 21 and have the physical space in your home and the time in your life to foster. You will need to able to demonstrate that you have the skills to look after children in your care.

We talk about finding families for children. That includes couples or single people, with or without their own children. For us, your sex, marital status, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion or level of disability are all important parts of who you are and what you can bring to meeting the needs of children in need of safe and nurturing homes. Equally there is no upper age limit to who can foster and you do not have to own your own home.

Becoming a foster carer

We talk a lot about the fostering journey. We recruit widely trying to reach as diverse a group of potential foster carers as possible. We take a multi-media approach and recognise the value of word of mouth. We also know that people think about fostering for a long time before making that first enquiry.

When we receive an enquiry from a potential foster carer we will make direct contact quickly to provide as much information as possible. If the potential foster carer is ready we will organise an early home visit.

If this proceeds to an application then the foster carer will be invited to attend our Preparation to Foster course. This may be done prior to the assessment by an allocated social worker or done in tandem. The assessment is completed using the BAAF assessment format.

The assessment process is an in depth assessment of the foster carer(s) competence to foster and includes extensive background checks.

The completed assessment is then presented to our Fostering Panel (see above) by the assessing social worker, and the applicant(s) will attend. The Panel will ask questions and want to explore reasons and suitability for fostering.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding children is of paramount concern in recruiting foster carers and in running the service.

Applicants undergo an enhanced AccessNI criminal records check as well as checks with Health and Social Care Trusts and local authorities where they have resided. We seek and interview referees; may need to check with significant ex-partners; and ask for medical checks.

Every foster family has a Safer Care Plan. We also conducted home safety checks.

Working closely with the child's own social worker we also make time to see and speak with the children in our care to make sure they are happy.

As well as children's safeguarding, we also follow adult safeguarding practice and procedures particularly as we are frequently continuing to support young people over the age of 18 years.

We have clear policies and procedures for dealing with allegations against foster carers or members of staff.

Complaints

We have policies and procedures for dealing with complaints from potential foster carers, foster carers, children in our care or from the agencies we work

with. We will always attempt to resolve complaints as quickly and informally as possible. However, our procedures do provide a clear framework for dealing with serious or unresolved complaints at the appropriate level in a timely manner.

We will provide clear information to complainants on how to make a complaint and the processes that will be followed.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Maintaining the confidentiality of children and foster carers is vitally important. Action for Children has robust policies and procedures and information systems in place to handle and store personal and sensitive data securely in line with data protection legislation and best practice. This includes regular training for staff and foster carers, and reviews of practice and processes in service meetings.

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