

Foster Carer

Peer Mentoring Handbook



WARRINGTON
Borough Council

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What is peer mentoring?

Peer mentoring refers to approved foster carers in a structured one-to-one relationship with other approved foster carers. Peer mentoring is delivered by a more experienced foster carer (the mentor) to a less experienced foster carer (the mentee), outside of any line management relationship. Mentors can offer emotional and practical support and advice from a position of understanding as foster carers themselves (Fostering Network).

Peer mentoring is a method for guiding and supporting and not managing or directing. It is a method to motivate and empower mentees to identify issues and goals and to resolve or reach them.

Aim and objectives of the peer mentoring scheme

Aim

The peer mentoring scheme is here to contribute to the Fostering Service's programme of support to foster carers, to ensure one-to-one supportive relationships between more and less experienced foster carers.

Objectives

- To support the recruitment and retention of foster carers
- To provide a problem solving resource for foster carers in difficulty
- To offer personal development for experienced foster carers
- To enhance the quality of care to children through increased skills, confidence and motivation of carers
- To improve placement stability

Benefits of a peer mentoring programme

For mentors

- Gaining wider recognition of ability to support and develop others
- Gaining increased personal satisfaction
- Develop networks
- Developing interpersonal skills
- Updating ideas and techniques
- Contribute to ongoing professional development
- Contribute to Fostering Service delivery, including supporting the retention of foster carers
- Can help to contribute to improved quality of care and outcomes for children

For mentees

- Help adapting to a new role and/or Fostering Service
- Gain a greater understanding of the role and tasks of a foster carer
- Feel less isolated
- Receive feedback on performance
- Receive trusted advice and guidance
- Develop new ideas, skills and knowledge
- Gain better communication links with the Fostering Service
- Meet training or development targets identified in your Personal Development Plan

The role of the mentor

Mentors provide an enhanced support service to foster carers, with the aim of developing the skills and understanding of the foster carers, and ultimately improving outcomes for children.

Eligibility criteria to be a foster carer mentor

To be a foster carer mentor you need to be an approved plus foster carer or an endorsed foster carer as set out in the payment appendices of the Fostering Services Allowances Payment Guide 2020 to 2021.

With support from a Supervising Social Worker, all mentors will be expected to complete a profile of themselves outlining their foster carer experience, qualities and skills, which will be taken into account when matching them to a mentee.

Approved foster carers who would like to be a mentor need to write an expression of interest of no more than a side of A4 outlining:

- the types of fostering you've undertaken
- why you want to become a foster carer mentor
- whether you have you any previous experience as a mentor or similar
- the skills, qualities and competencies you will bring to the role

The expression of interest will be read by the scheme co-ordinator and a Team Manager and a decision will be made whether the foster carer

should become a mentor.

Skills and qualities we need from a mentor

Personal qualities

Typically, an effective mentor in any setting would demonstrate values of:

- Enthusiasm
- Understanding
- Empathy
- Consistency
- Reliability
- Caring
- Warmth
- Commitment
- Flexibility
- Accepting

Skills and competencies

An effective mentor also needs to:

- Be able to establish and maintain rapport
- Actively listen and communicate, with an ability to give and receive information
- Maintain a non-judgemental approach
- Help people to explore their needs, motivations, desires, skills and thought processes
- Help people recognise and draw on their own strengths
- Help people focus on the 'why' rather than the 'what' of events and situations
- Help people to set appropriate goals and methods of assessing progress in relation to those goals
- Motivate people to develop new ideas, solutions, and strategies to achieve their goals
- Take a non-directive approach
- Understand and respect the need for confidentiality
- Manage time effectively
- Understand their own areas of personal competence and ability to work within that

Summary of core responsibilities and duties

To contribute to the wider fostering task by:

- Providing one-to-one support to newly approved foster carers and supporting their induction, for a planned period of six months and involving monthly face-to-face contact
- Contributing to the pre-approval of foster carers within the assessment process, to help enhance their knowledge of fostering and help prepare them for panel.
- Maintaining contact with foster carer mentees at the agreed times and dates.
- Providing telephone and email support to mentored foster carers.
- Helping foster carer mentees to identify appropriate goals and tasks and to work towards achieving these.
- Supporting up to two foster carer mentees at any one time.
- Promoting the peer mentoring scheme and participating in the quarterly mentoring support group.
- Attending training sessions for mentors (minimum one per year) combined with opportunities to network.
- Attending supervision sessions every six weeks with the Supervising Social Worker.
- Complying with fostering service policies and procedures, and in particular the confidentiality and recording policies relating to the peer mentoring scheme.
- Participating actively in evaluation of the peer mentoring scheme.
- Either attending information sessions/ other recruitment events or participating in foster carer training courses.

Matching mentors and mentees

Supervising Social Workers will match foster carers to mentors. The matching process needs to ensure that:

- All foster carers in assessment or when newly approved are allocated a mentor.
- Specific matching criteria is taken into account that you think is important, such as ethnicity or gender
- The supervising social worker who arranges the match for their carer forwards this to the scheme co-ordinator, so they can update the mentor/ mentee list to ensure that a record is kept of matches, so that these can be reviewed.
- If matches are unsuccessful, there is opportunity for the foster carer to be linked with a different mentor.

With one-to-one peer mentoring, where the intention is a sustained relationship for six months or longer, there needs to be an emphasis on the 'fit' between mentor and mentee. Some factors need to be considered when doing this:

Ethnicity, culture and language

The pool of mentors needs to reflect the language needs of prospective mentees for where English may not be their first spoken language.

Gender and relationship status

Some foster carers may feel more comfortable exploring emotional and personal matters with a mentor of the same gender, or vice versa.

Type of fostering

Another way of trying to match foster carers could be by type of fostering. For example, foster carers who foster teenagers or children with disabilities. Foster carers working with specific issues for the first time - such as a young person who may be questioning their sexuality - may be matched with another foster carer who has already supported a young person in this situation. Clearly, it is easier to advise and guide a less experienced foster carer on direct care matters if you have done similar fostering, and you are more likely to have credibility with them.

Geography

Geographical isolation is likely to be more of a feature in our friends and family foster carers placed outside of Warrington. Our mentoring scheme can address isolation by putting people in touch through telephone and email contact, but if regular face-to-face contact between mentor and mentee is expected the logistics of distance, travel time and costs would need to be considered. We will want to link foster carers who live close enough to one another.

Personality and learning styles

It is important that the personalities of mentors and mentees are matched so that both are enabled to get the best from the relationship. The matching process should take into account the individual characteristics of foster carers as well as the rich experience they might bring with them to their new task of fostering. This could have been gained in relevant previous employment settings such as nursing, teaching and a range of care professions.

Ratio of mentors to mentees

A foster carer peer mentor will mentor a maximum of two mentees at any given point in time. This number is for guidance purposes and not a set rule as this can vary considerably depending on the mentee's needs, amount of face-to-face contact and travelling time, and expectations around recording and reporting back.

In the main, peer mentors will themselves have fostered children in placement, and a key element of their own supervision must be consideration of the impact on fostering of being a mentor and vice versa. Supervising social workers and scheme co-ordinators should remain alert to the possibility that a mentor may struggle from time to time to balance the roles of foster carer and mentor. They must ensure that support is available.



Beginning and ending the mentoring relationship

Beginning

The relationship between mentor and mentee is likely to be most successful if the mentee understands what to expect and feels confident in the mentor. The mentor needs to be protected as far as possible from unrealistic expectations. A basic written contract or agreement between the mentor and mentee can cover aspects such as:

- Purpose of the relationship
- Specific skills and knowledge identified as development goals for the mentee
- Ground rules, including behaviour and personal responsibility
- Method/s and frequency of contact
- Role of others, such as the mentoring scheme co-ordinator
- Boundaries
- Recording
- Confidentiality
- Problem resolution

Ideally, the mentoring agreement can be completed face-to-face, perhaps with the involvement of the scheme co-ordinator at first and as mentors gain experience this can be arranged by themselves. The mentor may first contact the mentee by phone or email, and in these instances the mentor should have a mental checklist of issues that can be discussed without a written agreement being signed. The mentor and mentee can each have a copy of the agreement.

Ending

Duration of the relationship between mentor and mentee depends on purpose of the mentoring, but generally the relationship should last for:

- **For a new foster carer** - around 6 to 12 months
- **For a specific purpose** - around 3 to 6 months

In the most extreme case, mentors will need to take a break from mentoring. The supervising social worker will be responsible for reviewing this.

Conflict resolution

The mentoring agreement should include a process where disagreements between mentor and mentee can be addressed. This might involve participation in a meeting with one or more Supervising Social Workers. It is expected that the mentor and the mentee would try to resolve the conflict among themselves in the first instance.

It is possible that both parties may agree to bring the link to an end, in which case the scheme co-ordinator should consider whether there are any issues to be followed up and whether another mentor should be allocated. It's important to record all cases where there is a disagreement.

If a peer mentoring relationship is not working because of a clash of personalities or approaches, this does not mean that anyone has failed. The co-ordinator should try to help the participants, perhaps through a three-way meeting, to identify the ways in which they clash and whether either can alter their approach or style, but ultimately it is best to end the relationship rather than have it 'limp on'.

Confidentiality and recording arrangements

Maintaining and keeping records

The mentoring scheme places minimal expectations regarding records of contact between mentor and mentee as it is believed that an informal approach is reinforced without written records and this distances the activity from the bureaucracy of social work services. We recommend, however, that the following is implemented:

- A peer mentoring agreement between mentor and mentee that clarifies basic expectations and agreed support that the mentor will provide (See appendices).

Confidentiality

A mentoring relationship requires trust and an understanding around the issues of confidentiality between mentor and mentee. The mentee needs to feel confident that they can explore their true thoughts and feelings and that the mentor is sensitive to them and can respect boundaries.

It will be made clear to the mentor from the start of the relationship that they have a specific role with the mentee, covering areas such as understanding and adapting to fostering and the way the fostering service is run, encouraging involvement in the fostering community (for example attending support groups or training) and developing new ideas, skills and knowledge. They are not there as a substitute for access to the mentee's supervising social worker. At no time should a mentor feel as though they are being burdened with issues from the mentee beyond their abilities and role.

The essence of mentoring in foster care is a peer relationship, one step removed from the line management and supervisory accountabilities of the fostering service. But a mentor should still be clear about the ways in which they should manage and, if appropriate, pass on information if they have any concerns about the foster family, fostered child or young person or the child or young person's birth family.

In order for mentors to effectively manage the issue of confidentiality:

- The mentoring scheme has a written statement that both parties should respect confidentiality and will not disclose personal details or the content of discussions without the permission of the other party (See appendices).
- The statement also clarifies the circumstances under which confidentiality can be breached. In line with broader children's services policies, this is usually situations of actual or potential risk to children, adults or the service.
- There is a requirement that any written information about the mentee, mentor, children, or other families is kept in a secure place.
- The mentee receives a copy signed by both parties of any recording relating to the contact between mentor and mentee.
- The parties formally sign a confidentiality statement, as part of the mentoring agreement, which covers some or all of these elements.

Allegations and other concerns

Allegations during a mentoring relationship

When allegations, serious concerns about standards of care, or complaints about a foster carer arise, one option is to consider whether to appoint a mentor to provide non-judgemental support to the foster carer under investigation. A mentor is ideally placed to offer valuable support at a time when foster carers can feel particularly isolated.

However, providing peer mentoring is not the same as providing independent support as recommend in the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2011). This is a role distinct from the representation and advocacy. Peer mentors will not be expected to be the sole provider of independent support.

If one of the mentors becomes the subject of an allegation it will be necessary to review whether any ongoing mentoring relationships should be suspended while the matter is investigated. A mentor is likely to feel exposed or compromised during the period of investigation and questions will also be raised about their suitability for the role that cannot be resolved until the investigation is concluded.

Support for mentors

Supervision

The role of a mentor could be emotionally demanding and would need good support and supervision from their supervising social worker. The mentor's supervising social worker will provide the mentor with an opportunity to reflect on mentoring issues during their supervision sessions, which would be discussed as part of their ongoing personal development.

For anything urgent, the mentor can contact their supervising social worker. If they are not available, they can speak to the duty social worker or the scheme coordinator from Monday- Friday, 9am-5pm. Outside of these hours, the out of hours service can be contacted.

Health and safety issues

While the personal risks for foster carers meeting other foster carers are likely to be low, both parties should take reasonable steps to keep themselves safe. Mentors/mentees are strongly advised to let someone else know when they are going out on a visit. Mentors/mentees are advised to carry their personal mobile phone with them while out and contact the police if they feel a risk to their safety.

Training and development

Training will be provided to mentors to help them to develop their knowledge and skills regarding the mentoring role, which will be based upon a systemic approach.

All mentors will be expected to attend the quarterly mentor support group, during which there will be an opportunity to:

- Share experiences and offer mutual support and validation
- Evaluate and develop the role of mentor
- Undertake further specific learning and training
- Bounce ideas around and problem solve
- Hear about developments to the scheme and in the wider organisation
- Induct new mentors

The quarterly support group will be run by either the scheme co-ordinator or one of the supervising social workers within the Fostering Service.

Coordination of the scheme

The primary tasks of the scheme co-ordinator are to:

- Provide a high quality service to both mentors and mentees
- Be available to provide advice, support, and guidance to the mentors as well as the team
- Support induction and training or enable access to training for mentors
- Oversee the matching process of mentor and mentee
- Maintain an up-to-date list of mentors and mentees matches
- Review and evaluate the service in line with good practice
- Arrange for mentors to meet as a group on a quarterly basis

Using your feedback

This needs to be collated and put in an annual report, which should be used to improve the scheme and the work of the foster carers:

- To support the recruitment and retention of foster carers
- To provide a problem solving resource for foster carers in difficulty
- To support career progression for experienced foster carers
- To enhance the quality of care to children through increased skills, confidence and motivation of carers
- To improve placement stability

The mentor and mentee's personal development plan should also capture how support being provided/ received has helped to develop knowledge and skills and will contribute to the foster carer's yearly annual review.

Appendices

Mentor profile

Name of mentor
Location
Contact number/ email
Name of Supervising Social Worker
Number and age of children in placement
Do you have your own children living in the home if so please detail age
Skills and qualities
Specific experiences i.e. caring for children with health needs, drug and alcohol issues, aggression, emotional health difficulties, particular behaviours, sibling groups
Experience of contact i.e. difficult family situations, supervising contact, sibling contacts, facilitating contact with extended family members
Experience of moving children on i.e. rehabilitation home, adoption, long term placements

Expression of interest

Name of foster carer
Contact number/ email
Name of Supervising Social Worker
Types of fostering undertaken/ placements had
Outline why you want to become a foster carer mentor (no more than 100 words)
Previous experience as a mentor or similar role - describe your experience
Outline the skills, qualities and competencies you will bring to the role (no more than 200 words)

Confidentiality policy

Confidentiality statement – Foster Carer mentor scheme

1. The mentor and mentee both respect confidentiality and will not disclose personal details or the content of discussions without the permission of the other party.
2. The only exceptions to this are in respect of information disclosed that relates to an illegal act or situations of actual or potential risk to children, adults or the service. In this situation the mentor or mentee will inform the other party that they cannot maintain confidentiality and explain the process of breaking confidentiality.
3. This commitment to confidentiality continues after the mentor and mentee have concluded their mentoring relationship.
4. Both the mentor and mentee are responsible for keeping copies of any records or action plans in a safe secure place.

Signatures:

Mentee.....

Mentor.....



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Matching mentor to mentee

Matching criteria	Name of mentor	Name of mentee
Location		
Ethnicity, culture, language		
Gender and relationship status		
Types of fostering		
Personality		
Experience of carer/ support required for mentee		

Peer mentoring agreement

This is a statement of commitment to a mentoring partnership.

- We agree to protect each other's privacy and that personal information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to Warrington Borough Councils (WBC) Fostering Service Policy.
- We will act in accordance with WBC Equal Opportunities Policy, practices and Fostering Standards.
- We share responsibility for the conduct of this relationship; will not make unreasonable demands on each other's time and commit to the winding down of the relationship when it has achieved its purpose.
- Either of us may dissolve the relationship; however, both mentor and mentee have a responsibility for discussing and trying to resolve the matter together as part of mutual learning.
- This agreement will be shared with the Scheme Co-ordinator who both agree will act as our mediator if required.

Agreed learning goals:

Practical arrangements for contact:

Proposed duration of mentoring relationship and frequency of contact:

Agreed by all parties on (date):

Mentor signature:.....

Mentee signature:.....

Yearly Mentor Feedback

Name of mentor:

Date completed:

1. What has been your experience of the mentoring scheme so far?
2. Are you clear about your role as a mentor? If not, how could this be improved?
3. How effective have you found the co-ordination of the scheme?
4. How useful has the training/ support group been in supporting you in your role? How could this be improved?
5. Have you experienced any difficulties as a mentor? If so, how have these been overcome?
6. How has being a mentor helped to develop your knowledge and skills?
7. How do you think the scheme could be improved?

Signature:.....

Please return to the scheme co-ordinator

Mentee Feedback

Name of Mentee:

Date completed:

1. What was your experience of the mentoring scheme?
2. Where you happy with how the introductions took lace with your mentor?
If not, what could have been done differently?
3. Where you clear about the role of the mentor? If, not, how could this be improved?
4. What has been good in relation to the support provided by your mentor?
5. Did you experiences any difficulties? If so, how did you overcome these?

Please tick the box if you are happy for this feedback to be shared with your mentor

Signature:.....

Please return to the scheme co-ordinator

Notes



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