



**Sapling
Scheme**

Help and support
for **new foster
carers** and
professional
development
for **experienced
foster carers**



**Foster for
Warwickshire**



**Warwickshire
County Council**

What is the Sapling Scheme?

Becoming a foster carer can be a very daunting experience and we know that there are lots of different things to learn.

It can feel overwhelming, and we know that sometimes new carers can feel unsure about reaching out to their social workers with what might feel like a silly question. The 'Sapling Scheme' is designed to provide new applicants with a chance to connect

with experienced carers who can offer informal help and support. We have a huge wealth of skills and knowledge amongst our community of foster carers and are lucky that many of them are willing to share their experiences and support others. The Sapling Scheme seeks to pair newer foster carers with experienced carers from a similar area of fostering to support them on their journey for as long as they need.

What is involved?

The Sapling Scheme 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 to a less experienced foster carer. Experienced foster carers can offer emotional and practical support and advice from a position of understanding as foster carers themselves.

It is a way of guiding and supporting and not managing or directing to motivate and empower new foster carers to identify issues and goals and to resolve or reach them.



For experienced foster carers

- Develop support networks
- Develop interpersonal skills and in supporting others
- Update ideas and techniques
- Contribute to ongoing professional development
- Contribute to Fostering Service delivery, including supporting the retention of foster carers
- Contribute to improved quality of care and outcomes for children

Objectives

- **To enhance the quality of care to children through increased skills and confidence**
- **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 increase stability and resilience in foster care**

Benefits of the Sapling Scheme

For experienced foster carers

- Developing own support networks
- Developing interpersonal skills and in supporting others
- 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 new foster carers

- More able to adapt to a new role
- Gain a greater understanding of the role and tasks of a foster carer
- Feel less isolated
- Receive trusted advice and guidance
- Develop new ideas, skills and knowledge
- Gain better communication links with the Fostering Team



The role of the experienced foster carer

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

To undertake the experienced foster carer role, you need:

- At least two years of fostering experience
- To have completed all 6 core training units
- To have the support of their Supervising Social Worker
- To complete a profile outlining foster carer experience, qualities and skills



Skills and qualities

To fulfil the role, we ask that experienced foster carers are:

- **Accepting and non-judgemental**
- **Reliable and committed**
- **Warm and empathetic**
- **A good listener and communicator**
- **Reflective**
- **Able to challenge well**

Experienced foster carers also need to be able to reacquaint themselves with policy and procedures to ensure they are giving the right advice. We don't expect them to be specialists, but that they are offering the right information.

Core Tasks

- Offer 1:1 support during the assessment process, to include telephone contact at a minimum
- Offer monthly check ins for the first year. Ideally in person
- Provide ad hoc support as requested
- Attend the Sapling Scheme training session
- Attend Sapling Scheme 'virtual check ins' for experienced foster carers
- Be willing to share where there is a safeguarding issue at any point



Matching

Using the experienced foster carers completed profile, a family support worker with oversight of the Sampling Scheme will match foster carers with new applicants.

We will take into consideration location, types of fostering experience and personal matching preferences. With the consent of the new applicant, we will share their details with the experienced foster carer who will make contact.

An experienced foster carer will be matched with a maximum of two new foster carers at any given point in time. This number is for guidance purposes and not a set rule as this can vary considerably depending on needs, amount of face-to-face contact and travelling time, and expectations.



Beginning the relationship

The relationship is more likely to succeed if both parties understand what to expect and feels confident.

Our written agreement between both foster carers covers:

- Purpose of the relationship
- Ground rules, including behaviour and personal responsibility
- Method/s and frequency of contact
- Safeguarding
- Boundaries
- Recording
- Confidentiality
- Problem resolution

Ending the Relationship

The length of relationship depends on both parties but would usually be for between 6 to 12 months after approval.

We recognise that sometimes, this won't be necessary or that the connection hasn't been successful so there is no pressure to maintain the relationship when not required.

If it is agreed by both parties that the arrangement has come to a natural end, the experienced foster carer should update the scheme co-ordinator.



Confidentiality and recording arrangements

There are minimal expectations regarding records as it is believed that an informal approach is reinforced without written records. The Sapling Scheme co-ordinator will request a record of the written agreement and will check in via email every three months to offer support and that contact is still being maintained.

This kind of supportive relationship requires trust and an understanding around the issues of confidentiality. The new foster carer needs to feel confident that they can explore their true thoughts and feelings and that the experienced foster carer is sensitive to them and can respect boundaries.

The experienced foster carer should be clear about the ways in which they should manage and, if appropriate, pass on information if they have any concerns about the fostering family or child in care. Both the experienced and new foster carer will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement which outlines the boundaries of what will and won't be shared. In essence, only issues regarding safeguarding and well-being should be shared with scheme co-ordinator. Where issues arise that feel too overwhelming for the experienced foster carer, they should share where they don't feel able to support the new foster carer either directly or with the Sapling Scheme co-ordinator.

Allegations and other concerns

When allegations, serious concerns about standards of care, or complaints about a new foster carer arise, the Sapling relationship may be maintained. Experienced foster carers are ideally placed to offer valuable support at a time when foster carers can feel particularly isolated.

However, this is not the same as providing independent support as recommended in the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2011). This is a role distinct from the representation and advocacy.

If one of the experienced foster carers becomes the subject of an allegation it will be necessary to review whether any ongoing Sapling relationships should be suspended while the matter is investigated.



Experienced Foster Carer Profile



Name

Location

Contact number

Email

Name of Supervising Social Worker

Current children in care

Other members of your household

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 family time i.e. difficult family situations, supervising, sibling support, facilitating with extended family members

Experience of moving children on i.e. rehabilitation home, adoption, long term placements

Confidentiality statement – Sapling Scheme

1. Both experienced and new foster carer will 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 foster carer will inform the other party that they cannot maintain confidentiality and explain the process of sharing this information.

3. This commitment to confidentiality continues after the relationship has concluded.
4. Both the foster carers are responsible for keeping copies of any records or action plans in a safe secure place.

Sapling Scheme Agreement

This is a statement of commitment to the Sapling Scheme.

- We agree to protect each other's privacy and that personal information will be kept strictly confidential.
- We will act in accordance with WCC Equal Opportunities Policy, practises 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 foster carer may dissolve the relationship; however, both 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.

Practical arrangements for contact: Phone / email / text / in person

Frequency of contact:

Agreed by all parties on (date):

Names/s:

Signature:

Signature:

