

Fostering Strategy 2026-30



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1. Foreword

We are pleased to introduce our Fostering Strategy 2026 – 2030. This ambitious strategy is all about supporting our Foster Carers and strengthening our pledge to children to ensure that we will provide a choice of high quality and local family-based care when needed.

We have made a commitment to the children and young people of our Borough that we will work tirelessly to keep them safe within their family home and only become a child in our care to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Whilst most of our children in Bexley remain within their family home and connected to their community, sometimes it is necessary for children and young people to move to live elsewhere to keep them safe. In Bexley we will always try our best to keep children care for within their family/friend network and within their local community. This strategy sets our ambition to ensure all children remain cared for in local family-based care in

line with their needs and with our vision for children in our Borough. It outlines the ways we will promote awareness of our fostering offer to further enhance foster carers recruitment, further support and develop our foster carers and innovate to meet the changing needs of our community and carers. We have made significant strides to date on this journey and have increased the number of fostering household choice for children through a relentless focus to develop and support our carers but there is more we still need to do.

Together we can deliver our ambitions and will continue through delivery of this strategy alongside our skilled and dedicated foster carers to make a difference to children's lives. Finally, we would commend our carers for their passion, commitment and enduring care and kindness shown to children in our care.



Chris Taylor
Cabinet Member for Children and Families



Stephen Kitchman
Director of Children's Services

2. Vision

“To build and sustain a diverse and skilled fostering community where every child has the opportunity to thrive in a loving, supportive, and stable home. Through innovative recruitment, targeted outreach, and comprehensive support, we aim to attract, support, and retain passionate, committed foster carers. By fostering strong relationships, offering ongoing development, and recognising the invaluable contributions of our fostering families, we will ensure that every child’s unique needs are met with understanding, care, and dedication, leading to stable homes and positive outcomes for children.”





3. Aims and Objectives

The key aims and objectives of this Strategy are as follows:

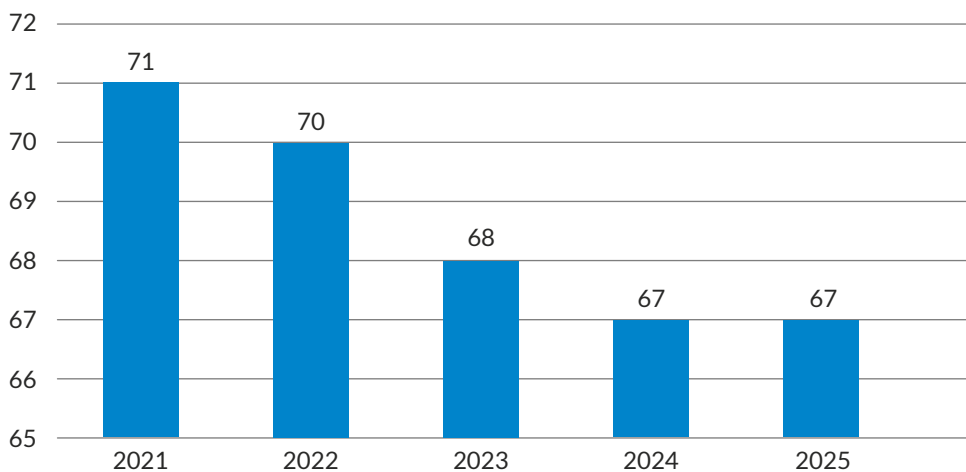
1. To retain and develop our Foster Carers through high quality flexible, formal and informal support, recognising their unique, skills, talents and commitment to children in our Borough.
2. To improve the resilience of our Foster Carers through our support to them and increase placement stability for children,
3. To increase the total number of local Foster Carers available for the children and young people of Bexley,
4. To increase the number of Foster Carers with the skills to care for adolescents,
5. To increase the number of Foster Carers with the skills to care for sibling groups,
6. To cease the use of Independent Fostering Agency arrangements in emergency situations,
7. Reduce the number of children in Residential Care in favour of living with skilled Foster Carers,
8. To develop our “Kinship Care offer” to support children in care to remain in their family & friend network.



4. National Context

- ▶ Most children in care are cared for by foster carers. Nationally, 54,820 (67%) children in care on 31 March 2025 were in fostering households, a decrease in numbers from 55,960 (67%) in 2024; 56,610 (68%) in 2023; and 57,170 (70%) in 2022.
- ▶ The 'Staying Put' initiative has also changed the profile of foster care, with 19% of young people in foster care turning 18 and still living with their former foster carer.

Total National Foster Placements



- ▶ The children and young people entering care do so with increasing complex care needs relating to mental health difficulties, educational needs and/or severe & profound disabilities.
- ▶ Local Authorities have faced increasing problems recruiting and retaining enough Foster Carers, particularly for those who require specialist care and support. As a result, there has been a significant use of and growth in Independent Fostering Agencies.
- ▶ The lack of Foster Carers means that matching a child to the right carer is increasingly difficult which impacts on placement stability and a decrease in long term care arrangements.

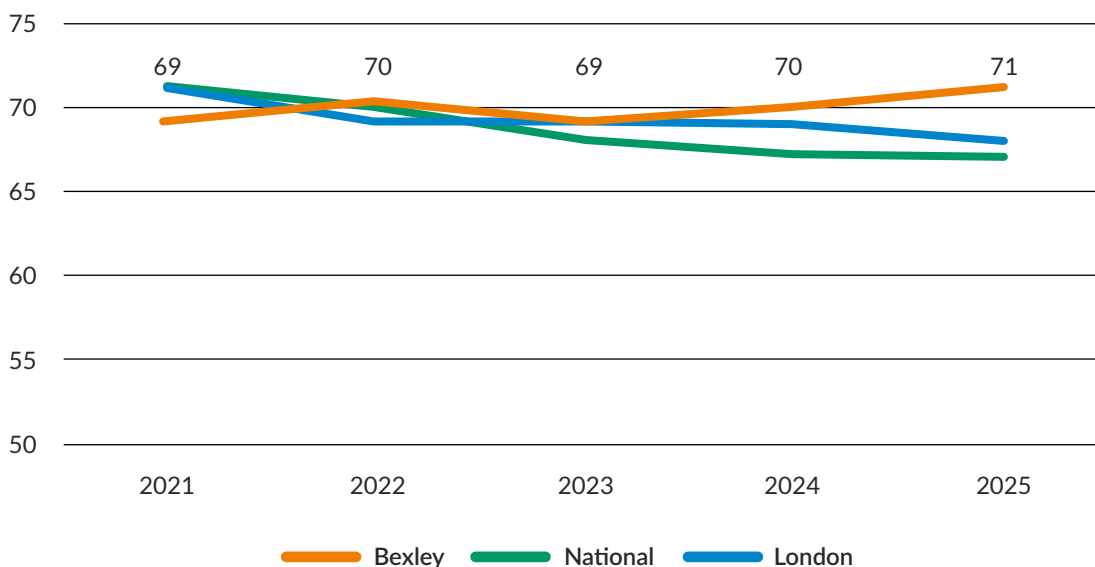
5. Bexley Context

- ▶ Over the past 5 years, the number of children in the care of Bexley has increased but with a slight drop in the numbers for the last year (289 as of 31 March 2025 from 292 as of 31 March 2024).
- ▶ The percentage of children in our care who are in foster care has increased gradually over the past 5 years which shows a growth in our fostering service and in a good position relating to the national and London average.

Foster Placements %	Bexley	National	London
2021	69	71	71
2022	70	70	69
2023	69	68	68
2024	70	67	68
2025	71	67	68

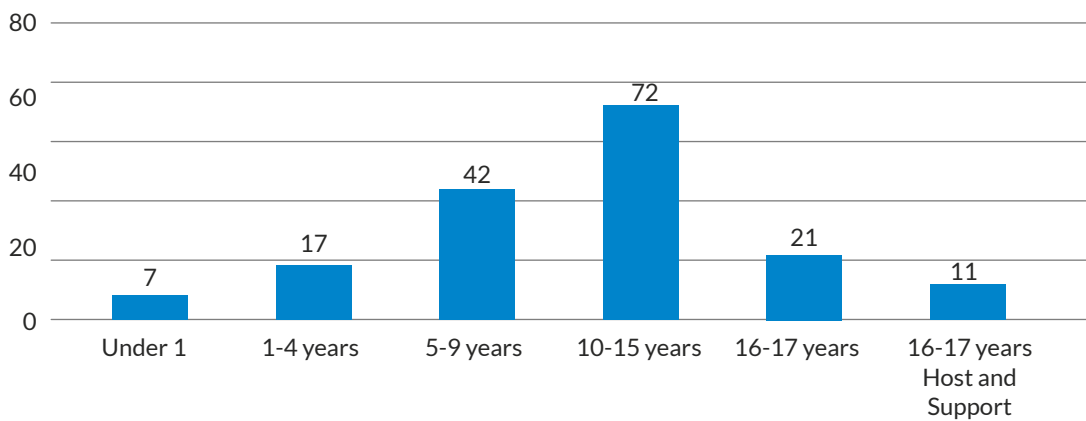
- ▶ The children and young people that have entered our care have more complex care needs in keeping with the national context.
- ▶ Over the last 5 years the number of Foster Carers we have approved as our local carers have increased.
- ▶ Most Bexley’s foster carers are aged 50 and above. Older carers bring life experience, stability, and resilience. However, long-term sustainability is at risk as many will retire in the coming years.
- ▶ We have a particular need for Foster Carers skilled at caring for adolescents and children with complex care needs (with severe and profound disabilities).
- ▶ We have a need for more Foster Carers who are skilled at caring for sibling groups.
- ▶ We recruit in an increasingly competitive marketplace for new Foster Carers, with other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies actively recruiting, some offering higher fees and allowances.

Foster Placements %

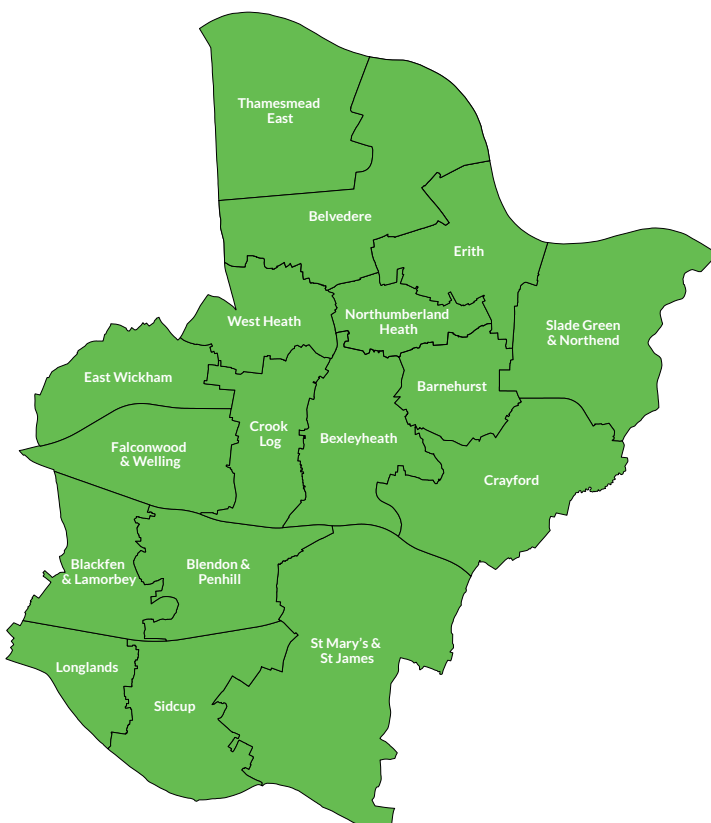


- ▶ Some children and young people living in a Children's Home could be living with skilled Foster Carers were such carers available.
- ▶ Bexley requires an increased number of fostering households to meet the diverse and changing needs of children in care. Every child is unique, and fostering households must reflect this diversity to ensure the best possible matches.
- ▶ Adolescents (10–17 years) represent almost two-thirds of all children in foster placements. Recruitment must therefore prioritise carers with the confidence and skills to support adolescents, while maintaining capacity for sibling groups and younger children.

Age Profile of Children placed in inhouse provisions

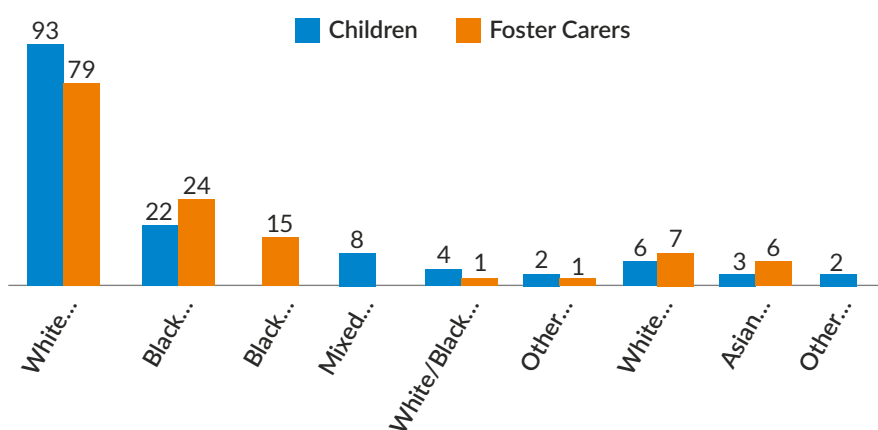


- ▶ The geographic distribution of foster carers is spread across most wards.



- ▶ Recruitment campaigns must prioritise these wards to ensure children can remain connected to schools, friendships, and their communities.
- ▶ Cultural matching is generally positive, with strong representation among White British, Black African, and Black Caribbean carers.
- ▶ There are too few carers of mixed heritage, despite 14 children identifying as mixed background.
- ▶ Asian carers are underrepresented, and recruitment must focus on addressing this gap.

Ethnicity of Children and Foster Carers, September 2025



(i) Working Foster Carers:

- ▶ Most new fostering households recruited in the last 2.5 years come from working families. Fostering must be promoted as compatible with employment, supported by:
 - Practical help with transport and school runs
 - Flexible respite and wraparound support
 - Robust financial allowances
- ▶ Supporting working carers widens the recruitment pool and strengthens long-term sufficiency.
- ▶ In line with above it would assist for Bexley to become a fostering friendly organisation.

(ii) Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention (April 2023 – January 2026):

- ▶ 16 fostering households recruited (Apr 2023 – Mar 2024)
- ▶ 20 fostering households recruited (Apr 2024 – Mar 2025)
- ▶ 13 fostering households & 6 Host & Support recruited (Apr 2025 – Jan 2026)
- ▶ 5 resignations each year for the past 3 years
- ▶ Current fostering households (January 2026): 130 (including Regulation 24)

(iii) Host & Support Recruitment and Retention:

- ▶ 9 providers recruited (Apr 2023 – Mar 2024)
- ▶ 3 providers recruited (Apr 2024 – Mar 2025)
- ▶ 6 providers recruited (Apr 2025 – Jan 2026)
- ▶ 3 resignations (2023/24), 0 resignations since Apr 2024, 1 deregistration in 2025
- ▶ Current Host & Support providers: 26

(iv) Fostering Together:

- ▶ 8 Core Carers leading communities
- ▶ 82 fostering households supported
- ▶ Specialist hubs:
 - (a) Under 7s
 - (b) Kent carers (reducing isolation for carers outside the Borough)
- ▶ All new carers join a community at the start of their fostering journey
- ▶ Future ambition: upskill deputies in each community to become Core Carers, creating new specialist hubs.

(v) Staying Put:

- ▶ We currently have 9 young adults staying with their foster carers after turning 18 years old.
- ▶ Bexley want to ensure that we support both our foster carers and our young adults leaving care to stay in with their foster carers where they feel safe until they turn 21 years old or are ready to move into independent living.
- ▶ We want to improve our staying put alongside our host and support arrangements for young people to continue in a supportive family environment and ensure readiness for their independence.
- ▶ The fostering service works closely with the leaving care service in linking the care leavers offer with the fostering strategy.

(v) Fostering Carer Training:

- ▶ TSDS workshops, allegations training, fostering parenting groups, log keeping,
- ▶ PACE training (6 sessions), attachment 2-day training, disenfranchised loss,
- ▶ Total Respect and KEEP (12-week sessions), LGBTQ+, social media and Online safety, Staying Put, mental health,
- ▶ NVR, Autism and ADHD, working with teenagers, introductions to Fostering, and birth children's groups and direct work.
- ▶ Paediatric first aid,
- ▶ Safeguarding & Child Exploitation/Missing,
- ▶ Trauma informed practice,
- ▶ Drug and dependency awareness

Foster Carers can book onto any online training provided by our SHIELD (Local Area Safeguarding Partnership in Bexley). The feedback from foster carers is positive about training opportunities and valuing their skill and knowledge base.



6. Our Pressures

- a) 13+ young people are the largest cohort. Recruitment must target carers for adolescents and strengthen Host & Support for 16-21-year-olds planning for their leaving care and transitioning effectively.
- b) Geographic gaps exist. No carers in Erith or Longlands – targeted local recruitment needed.
- c) Ethnic diversity. Shortage of mixed heritage and Asian carers requires focused campaigns.
- d) Carer age profile. Over-reliance on older carers risks long-term sustainability; younger carers must be recruited.
- e) Working households. Recruitment and retention must support carers to combine fostering with employment.
- f) Retention pressures. With 5 resignations per year, sustained investment in support (e.g., Fostering Together) is essential.

7. Our Ambitions

Within 4 years we will:

- ▶ No longer use any Independent Fostering Agency placements in emergency situations.
- ▶ Recruit an additional 80 Fostering Households of which 20 will offer specialist placements for teenagers or sibling groups and 10 will offer specialist care and support to children with severe and profound disabilities.
- ▶ Ensuring that 90% of children in our care live with our own local Foster Carers, keeping them connected to their community.
- ▶ Enabling 80% of children in our care to live with their sibling(s).
- ▶ Recruit and retain younger carers through a comprehensive campaign and offer considering working younger single adults as well as younger working families.
- ▶ Offer at least a choice of 2 foster carer profiles when children are coming into care or Host & Support, depending on their complex care needs and foster carer skill/training level.



8. Our Plan

8.1 Recruitment Objectives and Key Performance Indicators:

A: Broaden the pool of foster carers to ensure sufficiency and placement choice.

- ▶ Number of new fostering households recruited annually (target: 20+).

B: Attract carers for priority needs, particularly parent/child placements, teenagers, sibling groups, and children with complex needs.

- ▶ 10% of new approvals for teenagers, sibling groups, or children with complex needs.

C: Increase diversity among foster carers to reflect the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of children in care.

- ▶ 5% of new carers from underrepresented ethnic groups (mixed heritage, Asian).

D: Strengthen the geographic spread of carers, with targeted recruitment in wards such as Erith and Longlands.

- ▶ 4 households recruited in Erith and Longlands

E: Position fostering as compatible with employment, attracting working households and younger carers.

- ▶ Track number of new carers from working households annually.

F: Expand specialist fostering services, including Fostering Together, Host & Support, Parent & Child, and Emergency Beds.

- ▶ Increase specialist fostering services with 10%.

8.2 Retention Objectives and Key Performance Indicators:

A: Improve foster carer satisfaction and wellbeing through peer support, mentoring, and wellbeing services.

- ▶ Carer satisfaction rating (target: 85%+ positive feedback).

B: Reduce placement breakdowns by strengthening resilience, emergency support, and specialist advice.

- ▶ Placement stability – 50% reduction in breakdowns by 2030.

C: Retain experienced carers for longer, reducing reliance on agency and residential provision.

- ▶ Annual foster carer retention rate (target: 90%+).

D: Recognise and celebrate foster carers, ensuring they feel valued and appreciated.

- ▶ Annual event of recognition/celebration event as well as monthly coffee mornings. Bexley to become a foster care friendly Borough for employees who are foster carers. The creation of fostering hubs in the community where they can come together for group or peer mentoring, offer support for placement under pressure or children out of education. Fostering Support as employees with benefits, i.e. council tax relief and/or parking permit benefits.

E: Strengthen carer skills and confidence through high-quality training and continuous development.

- ▶ 95% of training attendance and completion rates for carers.

8.3 Specialist Services – Objectives and Key Performance Indicators:

8.3.1 Fostering Together:

Fostering Together is Bexley's extended-family model of foster care, inspired by the "Mockingbird" programme. Each community is led by a Core Carer, who provides peer support, mentoring, and respite for up to 10 fostering households. This approach replicates the protective factors of extended families, reducing

isolation and ensuring carers feel supported. Children benefit from stability, continuity, and consistent relationships with a wider circle of trusted adults.

The model has already expanded to 8 communities supporting 82 households, including specialist hubs for under 7s and Kent carers. Feedback from carers and young people highlights improved placement stability, stronger sibling contact, and reduced burnout among carers.

Objectives and Key Performance Indicators:

A: Provide all new carers with immediate access to peer support.

▶ 15 communities by 2030.

B: Reduce placement breakdowns by embedding support within communities.

▶ 25% reduction in placement breakdowns.

C: Develop specialist hubs tailored to placement needs (teenagers, parent & child, complex needs).

▶ 5 specialist communities by 2030.

D: Upskill deputies to become future Core Carers, ensuring sustainability.

▶ 90%+ retention of carers in communities.

8.3.2 Host & Support:

Host & Support provides supported accommodation for young people aged 16-21 who are preparing for independence. Providers offer safe, stable homes where young people can build essential life skills such as budgeting, cooking, attending appointments, and managing a tenancy. Unlike emergency provision, this is a planned, step-down service that bridges the gap between foster care and adulthood.

With 25 providers currently in place and 11 young people aged 16-17 already supported, this service is reducing risk of future unemployment and homelessness. Providers are assessed,

trained, and supported by supervising social workers, ensuring quality and safeguarding.

Objectives and Key Performance Indicators:

A: Increase provision to meet the growing needs of 16-17-year-olds entering care and supporting young people leaving care.

▶ Recruit 10 new providers annually and retain 85% of providers.

B: Support young people to develop independence skills in a safe, supportive environment and reducing housing instability and the risk of homelessness.

▶ Place 80% of eligible young people in-borough by 2030.

C: Integrate support with education, training, and employment pathways.

▶ There will be 95% of 16+ young people in full time education and/or employment (apprenticeships included).

8.3.3 Emergency Beds:

The Emergency Care (Beds) service ensures children have access to safe, local placements at very short notice, often out-of-hours. These carers provide immediate stability and reassurance at a point of crisis, buying time for social workers to make well-planned long-term decisions. Without this service, children risk living in costly, out-of-borough agency placements or unsuitable temporary accommodation.

Emergency carers are specially trained to provide calm, responsive care in high-pressure circumstances. They often support teenagers or children with complex needs, requiring resilience and flexibility.

Objectives and Key Performance Indicators:

- A: Ensure Bexley has immediate access to emergency placements.**
- ▶ Approve 10 emergency carers and respond to 100% of emergency requests within 2 hours with a placement.
- B: Reduce reliance on high-cost agency and residential beds and guarantee that children remain in safe, local placements close to their communities.**
- ▶ Reduce out-of-borough emergency moves by 50% in 5 years and ensure time limit of 14 days for transition to a long-term placement.

8.3.4 Parent and Child Placements:

Parent and Child fostering allows vulnerable parents to remain with their children in a supported household, avoiding separation and offering the opportunity for parenting capacity assessments in a family setting. This service provides both safeguarding and the potential for family preservation, reducing reliance on residential assessment units which are expensive and less child friendly.

Foster carers are specially trained to model and guide parenting behaviours, support assessments, and ensure the child's needs are always prioritised.

Objectives and Key Performance Indicators:

- A: Support parents to safely care for their children in a nurturing environment, reducing separation of parents and children through early intervention.**
- ▶ Recruit 6 parent and child fostering households by 2030 and place 80% of referrals in-borough.
- C: Decrease reliance on residential parent and child units.**
- ▶ Reduce residential use by 50% within 3 years and 90% within 5 years.



9. Recruitment Delivery

The successful delivery of this strategy requires a coordinated and proactive approach across recruitment, retention, specialist services, and workforce development.

A: Targeted Marketing and Campaigns:

- Run sustained digital campaigns across Facebook, Instagram, and X, using demographic targeting to reach underrepresented groups (Asian, mixed heritage, younger families, working households).
- Use storytelling and lived experience through short videos, testimonials, and case studies.
- Advertise through outdoor media (JC Decaux boards, posters in GPs, schools, libraries, and leisure centres).
- Place radio ads on Maritime Radio and local stations, featuring carers and children's voices.

B: Website and Digital Engagement:

- ▶ Maintain a modern, user-friendly website with:
 - Interactive tools (e.g. "Could you foster?" quizzes).
 - Online booking for information sessions.
 - Easy enquiry forms linked to the recruitment team.
 - Monitor website performance using Google Analytics to refine campaigns.

C: Community Outreach:

- Partner with faith groups, schools, and businesses to host recruitment events.
- Attend community festivals, school fairs, and supermarkets to maintain visibility.
- Work with local councillors and community leaders to champion fostering in specific wards (particularly Erith and Longlands).

D: Peer Advocacy:

- Continue to develop Foster Carer Champions who attend events, speak at information sessions, and co-deliver "Skills to Foster" training.
- Provide carers with ready-made social media packs (graphics, story prompts, templates) to share fostering within their personal networks.
- Expand the referral scheme, increasing the incentive to £1,000 during peak recruitment campaigns.

E: Care Experienced Young People:

- Involve Positive Journeys and young ambassadors at recruitment events to share lived experience.
- Feature young people's voices in marketing campaigns, showing the impact of fostering on real lives.

F: Employer Engagement:

- Position Bexley as a fostering-friendly employer, promoting policies that support staff who foster.
- Encourage other local employers to adopt similar practices, reducing barriers for working carers.

10. Retention

- ▶ Universal access to Fostering Together.
- ▶ Specialist training (trauma, adolescents, complex care needs, Host & Support skills).
- ▶ Wellbeing and reflective supervision.
- ▶ Recognition through events, awards, and communications.
- ▶ Practical support with allowances, equipment, and transport.
- ▶ Bexley being a fostering friendly employer.



11. How we will know if our Plan is working:

This Strategy is deliberately ambitious. We know there is a lot more to do. We want to:

- ▶ Consult more widely and more often
- ▶ Pay more and pay differently
- ▶ Offer better support
- ▶ Make the Fostering role more visible and more accessible
- ▶ Offer more training to more skilled carers
- ▶ Expand and transform the kinship and Special Guardianship offer to keep children in their families.
- ▶ Develop the digital platform to allow for support to all carers 24/7 whatever time and wherever they are.

Each of these elements of our plan has a range of outputs that can be counted – how many Fostering Support Groups we have, how many likes on our Fostering Service social media pages – data like this will form a part of our understanding about whether our plan is working and on the right track. However, we will not lose sight of the focus of all our activity, the Aims of the Strategy. The following six questions will be key:

- ▶ How many Independent Fostering Agency care arrangements have we used.
- ▶ How many additional Fostering Households have we recruited.
- ▶ What percentage of our children in care are placed with our own local Foster Carers and/or family members.
- ▶ What percentage of sibling groups have we been able to place together.
- ▶ How have we increased the placement stability and outcomes for young people in education and training.
- ▶ What is the feedback from carers and children and young adults tell us.

12. Quality Assurance (Monitoring and Evaluation)

- ▶ Monthly and Quarterly review of recruitment and retention KPIs.
- ▶ Analysis of enquiries, approvals, resignations, and exits.
- ▶ Placement stability data monitored monthly, quarterly and annually to interrogate any trends and needs changes.
- ▶ Regular case file audits.
- ▶ Monthly Permanence Panel review of care plans and progress.
- ▶ Monthly supervision of carers and practitioners.
- ▶ Monthly performance reports of managers.
- ▶ Feedback from carers, children, and young people during children in care reviews, Personal Education Planning meetings, Education Health & Care Plan meetings/ reviews and as part of each formal child's case file audit.

13. Our transformation journey

We are on a transformation¹ journey with our foster care community and children in our care to ensure we are agile in our adjustments of services and local offers to meet their needs successfully.

By 2030 our kinship offer will be better suited to help keep children in their family and friend networks as per the social care reforms in kinship. To achieve this, there will be a detailed kinship² strategy in place with regular reviews of impact and change to be implemented by 2027.

The support and incentives for caring for children will be more aligned regardless of being a foster carer, kinship carer or Special Guardian to a child.

Our young adults leaving our care will feel more supported and closer³ to the carers they know and feel safe with through their transitioning into adulthood by us developing a new local offer for care leavers and updating our staying put and staying close guidance and policies.



[1 Independent review of children's social care: final report - GOV.UK](#)

[2 Championing kinship care: national kinship care strategy - GOV.UK](#)

[3 Children's social care stable homes built on love consultation](#)

Strategic Priority	2026–2027 (Foundation & Stabilisation)	2027–2028 (Expansion & Embedding)	2028–2029 (Quality & Outcomes Focus)	2029–2030 (Sustainability & Excellence)
1. Recruitment & Sufficiency	Deliver targeted local recruitment campaigns to increase in-house carers and reduce external placements	Broaden recruitment to specialist carers (teens, disabilities, complex needs)	Achieve sufficiency for most placement types within borough	Maintain stable sufficiency with reduced reliance on IFAs and improved matching
2. Carer Retention & Support	Strengthen supervision, peer support and Mockingbird/Fostering Together hubs	Expand hub model and introduce enhanced retention incentives	Embed advanced support offers (therapeutic input, crisis response)	High retention rates with strong carer satisfaction and long-term sustainability
3. Placement Stability	Improve matching processes and reduce emergency placements	Reduce placement disruptions through early intervention and support	Achieve measurable reduction in placement moves	Consistent stability with children experiencing fewer moves and stronger permanence outcomes
4. Workforce Development	Deliver core training for social workers and carers (e.g. KEEP SAFE, trauma-informed care)	Embed continuous professional development pathways	Develop specialist practitioner roles (e.g. therapeutically trained staff)	Highly skilled workforce with advanced practice embedded across teams
5. Quality of Care & Outcomes	Ensure all placements meet regulatory standards and improve recording and oversight	Strengthen education, health and emotional wellbeing outcomes for children	Evidence measurable improvements in outcomes (education, wellbeing, independence)	Achieve consistently strong Ofsted outcomes and high-quality lived experiences for children
6. Permanence & Pathways Planning	Strengthen early permanence and matching decision-making	Increase long-term fostering and kinship options	Reduce delays in permanence planning	Children experience timely permanence with fewer delays and improved life chances
7. Partnership & Systems Integration	Improve collaboration with Virtual School, health and safeguarding partners	Embed multi-agency working and shared accountability models	Deliver integrated pathways for complex children (SEND, exploitation risk)	Fully integrated system delivering seamless support across services
8. Data, Performance & Insight	Improve data quality, tracking and reporting (e.g. LiquidLogic, Power BI issues identified)	Introduce predictive analytics for placement needs and prevention	Use data to proactively manage risk and improve decision-making	Data-driven service with real-time insights informing strategy and commissioning

14. Conclusion

Our Strategy will not be a success without our Fostering Community – our heroes – they must feel that the difference we are trying to achieve has improved their own experience of the Fostering role as well as the children and young adults in their care. We will be asking them on a regular basis how they think we are doing.

Finally, the success of this Strategy should mean that children and young people have the right care at the right time in the right place with the right carers. This Strategy is all about them. We will be asking our children in our care and young adults leaving our care how they think we are doing.





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