



Guide to Establishing Regional Fostering Recruitment Support Hubs

Version 1 – April 2024



Introduction

Fostering Recruitment Support Hubs are centrally-run recruitment services, working across groups of local authorities. They provide a single point of contact for people interested in fostering in a region, supporting them throughout the recruitment journey from initial enquiry to application.

The aim of hubs is to increase the number of foster carers recruited and provide more loving homes for vulnerable children. They also build and maintain relationships with prospective foster carers even if they are not ready to foster at the point they enquire.

This guide provides a roadmap for establishing a hub, based on experience from the Department for Education’s Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme. It is intended as a ‘how to’ guide and is not a statement of policy or an evaluation report.

This guide is designed for:

- **local authorities in the process of establishing a hub** – to help them navigate the process and understand all key considerations
- **local authorities that may want to establish a hub in the future** – to understand what is required and the process to get there
- **the wider local authority and children’s sector** – to share learning from the process of setting up hubs, which may be transferrable for other regional working programmes

The Department for Education’s Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme is currently funding ten recruitment support hubs, with the aim of these being self-sustaining models.

The first of these, [‘Foster with North East’](#), launched in September 2023. Nine other hubs are expected to be operational by May 2024.



DfE Fostering Recruitment & Retention Programme

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care and Competition and Markets Authority review into Children’s Social Care have called for urgent action to recruit more foster carers. There is a long-standing placement sufficiency problem in foster care and a need to recruit the right foster carers to support harder to place children, such as sibling groups or Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

In the Government’s response to the reports, “Stable Homes, Built on Love”, the Department for Education made fostering a priority commitment and pledged to deliver the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme, investing £36 million from 2022 to 2025. The programme provides funding to local authorities to work in self-identifying, geographically linked ‘clusters’ to

redesign the experience for prospective foster carers, improving the recruitment journey from initial enquiry through to application, with the aim of increasing the conversion rate between initial enquiry and application.

This aims to deliver end-to-end improvements across foster care, by encouraging more people to consider foster caring, boosting approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage, as well as addressing retention through funding of the evidence-based Mockingbird model.

Nine self-selected “clusters” of local authorities successfully bid to deliver the programme from October 2023 to March 2025, alongside Foster with North East, the pathfinder for the project.

Programme elements:



1. A Fostering Recruitment Support Hub which should cover the foster carers journey from initial enquiry through to application and be a centrally-run ‘front door’ to foster care recruitment across each local authority cluster. Prospective foster carers will benefit from a responsive and dedicated initial information and support service following an enquiry to help with their decision about whether to proceed, before high-quality prospective foster carers are handed over to individual LAs who will continue to take forward assessment and approval. The development of recruitment support hubs is expected to increase the number of foster carers across a region. DfE also wants local authorities to standardise processes and work towards agreeing common terms and conditions.



2. A targeted foster care recruitment communications campaign to drive interest to Recruitment Support Hubs and boost the number of quality enquiries.



3. Roll out of the evidence-based ‘Mockingbird’ model to enhance the offer to new applicants and boost retention of existing carers. Local authorities will be funded to develop new Mockingbird “constellations”, based around building strong and supportive relationships among groups of foster carers and children in an area, empowering them to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate.

The benefits of a regional approach to foster care recruitment

Foster carers play a critical role in the care system, comprising more than seven in every ten placements for children.

But demand for foster carers is not keeping up with supply. Over the last five years, there has been a downward trend in the number of applications, coupled with a striking gap between those expressing interest and those going on to foster. This leaves us with a shortfall of carers – and not enough homes for children that need them.

Why move to regional working?

Working across a wider geographical footprint provides an opportunity to address some of the challenges faced by individual local authorities, and benefit from doing things at scale. Establishing a regional fostering recruitment support hub means local authorities have a **greater ability to offer a focused, specialist service** – one that is able to give its full attention to and champion prospective foster carers.

Acting together, local authorities can **think differently about recruitment**. Feedback suggest that prospective foster carers are not always getting the dedicated support needed to encourage them to make it to the end of the journey and foster a child. Local authorities can

redesign the process to address points of weakness, including making sure prospective foster carers feel supported and that all enquiries are treated in an authentic, respectful and compassionate way.

A coordinated regional campaign can allow local authorities to target particular sufficiency issues and new types of foster carers to address need.

Cooperating across a region also provides opportunity to **share learning, expertise and skills**. The strengths of one local authority can be complemented by the strengths of others, for example, in sharing experience recruiting specialist foster carers or commissioning support for families.

Local authorities should also be able to identify **clear financial benefits**. More foster carers will reduce their need to buy high-cost residential placements – with a single avoided placement saving potentially thousands of pounds – making a strong business case for investment. **Economies of scale** may be found in back office and support services.

Ultimately, the benefits of a more effective approach to recruiting foster carers should be experienced by children, **with more loving homes in their own communities when they need them**.

Objectives of the DfE's Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme:

- To improve the experience of children in care by ensuring there are more foster carers, and good matches in children's own communities
- To increase the number of foster carers successfully recruited, by redesigning the recruitment processes, and addressing points of weakness
- To reduce the number of foster carers who de-register. Foster carers entering the system can be better prepared, tackling the high rates of drop-out within the first two years.
- To increase placement suitability. Having more foster carers, who are better supported will mean local authorities will be able to form stronger matches between child and placement.
- To deliver cost savings for local authorities. By expanding the pool of local authority foster carers, it will reduce dependency on higher-cost alternative placements.

Purpose

This guide provides a roadmap for establishing a Regional Fostering Recruitment Support Hub, drawing insights from the experiences gained through the Department for Education’s Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is designed for:

- **local authorities in the process of establishing a hub** – to help them navigate the process and understand all key considerations
- **local authorities that may want to establish a hub in the future** – to understand what is required and the process to get there
- **the wider local authority and children’s sector** – to share learning from the process of setting up hubs, which may be transferrable for other regional working programmes

This guide will be updated later in 2024.



Links to Resources

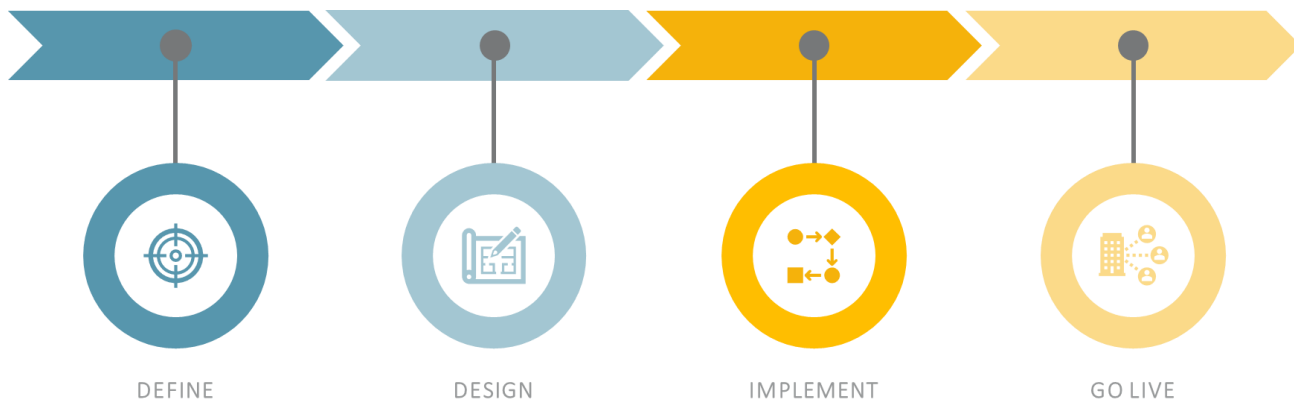
Throughout this document, you will find links to useful resources, including tools and templates. Click on the **title** to access these.



Cluster Examples

This guide contains examples from local authority clusters participating in the Department for Education’s Fostering Recruitment & Retention Programme. In particular, it draws insights from the North East Pathfinder, which launched their recruitment support hub in September 2023, [Foster with North East](#). Future versions of the guide will be updated to include additional examples.

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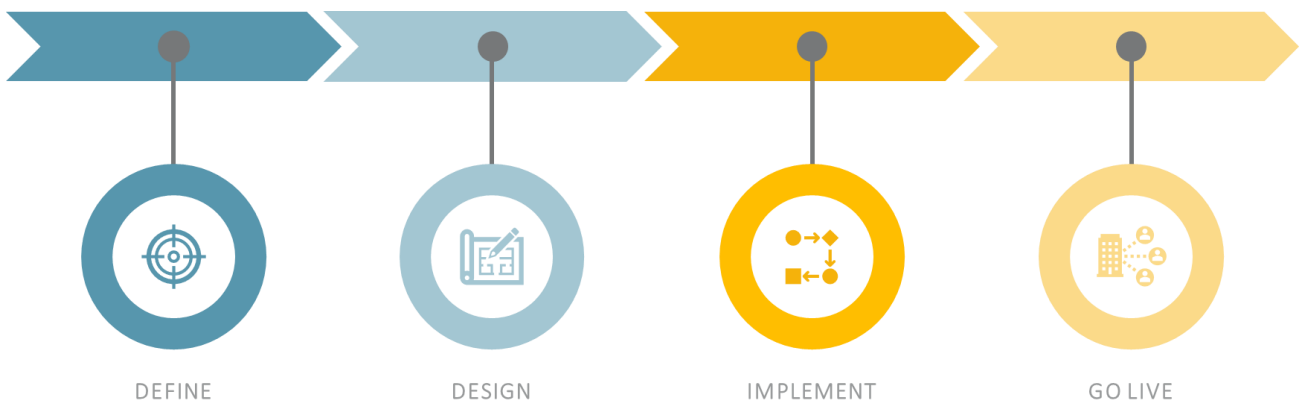
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1. Define

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Define



1.1 Understanding your Fostering Recruitment & Retention Needs

At the outset, it is important to understand the current position of fostering recruitment and retention in your area, the experience of prospective foster carers, and whether you have the right number and type of foster carers for your children and families, now and in the future.

Conducting a needs assessment is a valuable approach to understanding these issues. It is also essential for you to better understand what you have in terms of resources across a region – and crucially, what you are missing.

Developing a collective understanding of need will enable groups of local authorities to take a more strategic approach to developing their Recruitment Support Hub that targets their specific sufficiency pressures. It will provide insights that will inform strategies to attract and retain foster carers effectively, and enhance the overall support they receive through the Recruitment Support Hub.



The North East Pathfinder

In the early stages of designing their fostering Recruitment Support Hub, the North East Pathfinder held focus groups with foster carers to understand their experiences of current recruitment processes in the North East.

Engaging with individuals at various stages of their fostering journey was deemed essential to gaining a well-rounded understanding of the foster carer experience in the region.



Exit Interview Toolkit



The Fostering Network’s Exit Interview Toolkit is a useful tool for understanding why foster carers leave their fostering service.



Needs Analysis Template



This needs analysis template was created by the Department for Education and The Fostering Network as a starting point for fostering services to inform recruitment and retention strategies.

Key areas it focuses on include:

1. Local children looked after (CLA) population profile, including existing CLA and edge of care population
2. Foster carer population profile
3. Quality of placements being provided
4. Quality of your recruitment and assessment processes, including feedback from applicants and your recruitment team
5. Comparison with other LAs
6. Costs, including how much it costs to recruit a foster carer, costs of different types of foster placements, and the cost of a placement breaking down
7. Gap analysis – does your local foster care workforce meet the needs of the current and projected population of CLA?
8. Recruitment and retention strategy
9. Recruitment and retention action plan



Regional Hub Intelligence Tool

The purpose of this tool is to provide access to publicly available data from Ofsted and the Department for Education in a regional format, help local authority clusters ask questions about performance, and allow areas to compare themselves.

The ‘Context’ worksheet provides an overview of the key statistics on the numbers of CLA and fostering households for each hub area, by aggregating data for each local authority.



1.2 Defining Partnerships

To deliver a regional Recruitment Support Hub, you need to identify and define who you will work with. This includes identifying your regional footprint and understanding the role for foster carers.

Your Area

Determining which local authorities will be working together on your fostering Recruitment Support Hub is a fundamental question. Key questions to consider when making that decision include:

- What existing regional footprints are there in your region, and what local authorities are involved? For example, what is the Regional Adoption Agency model in your area or the Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance footprint?
- What existing collaboration and partnerships exist in the region - for example, the regional ADCS group?
- Where are there shared challenges between local authorities which you could address in setting up a regional fostering Recruitment Support Hub?
- What capacity do local authorities have to engage in the project?
- Where is there greatest support for a regional fostering Recruitment Support Hub, particularly at Director of Children's Service (DCS) and senior level?
- Where will your hub be? i.e. will it be virtual or have a physical location?
- Is there a local authority that is a 'natural' candidate to lead the process?

Partnership with foster carers

For your Recruitment Support Hub to be a success, it is vital that foster carers are engaged as authentic partners. It is important to define this partnership with foster carers at the outset to ensure they are kept at the centre of your Recruitment Support Hub throughout the process of design and implementation, and when the hub is live. You may have existing partnership with foster carers which can be engaged as part of developing your recruitment support hub, such as Fostering Associations.

Consider how you will engage care experienced young people and siblings of foster children.

Principles for engaging foster carers:

- **Inclusive approach:** including a diverse group of foster carers in this process will ensure representation of your community and enable you to capture a range of experiences and perspectives. Ensure engagement methods are flexible and accessible.
- **Recognise foster carers as experts in their field:** their practical experience is invaluable and respecting their expertise will enhance the credibility and effectiveness of your Recruitment Support Hub. Acknowledge and appreciate their efforts and time.
- **Transparent communication:** keep foster carers informed throughout the process through regular updates on how their feedback is being used and contributing to the design of the hub, and how these decisions impact them.
- **Engage foster carers with a range of fostering experience** e.g. specialist foster carers, new foster carers, experienced foster carers. Try to engage prospective foster carers who decided not to proceed as this will help you understand key drop-off points and how your fostering hub could mitigate this.



Example: South East's Foster Carer Reference Group

The South East cluster have created a Foster Carer Reference Group to consult foster carers on the development of the Recruitment Support Hub. For example, members conducted mystery shopping of local authority fostering websites to give their view on existing websites and what works. Foster carers have also been involved in interview panels for hub staff.



1.3 Vision

Defining a clear, shared vision is an essential step for your Recruitment Support Hub and will help you identify and agree the core activities of the hub. Agreeing this with partners from the outset will help mitigate conflicts and allow you to measure the success of the hub.

Key questions to consider when defining your vision:

- What does a regional approach to fostering recruitment mean in your area?
- What does a successful Recruitment Support Hub look like?
- What do you want your hub to achieve, including long-term and short-term outcomes?
- What is the scope of the hub?
- What is needed for successful regional cooperation between local authorities across your footprint?

Example Theory of Change:

Theory of Change

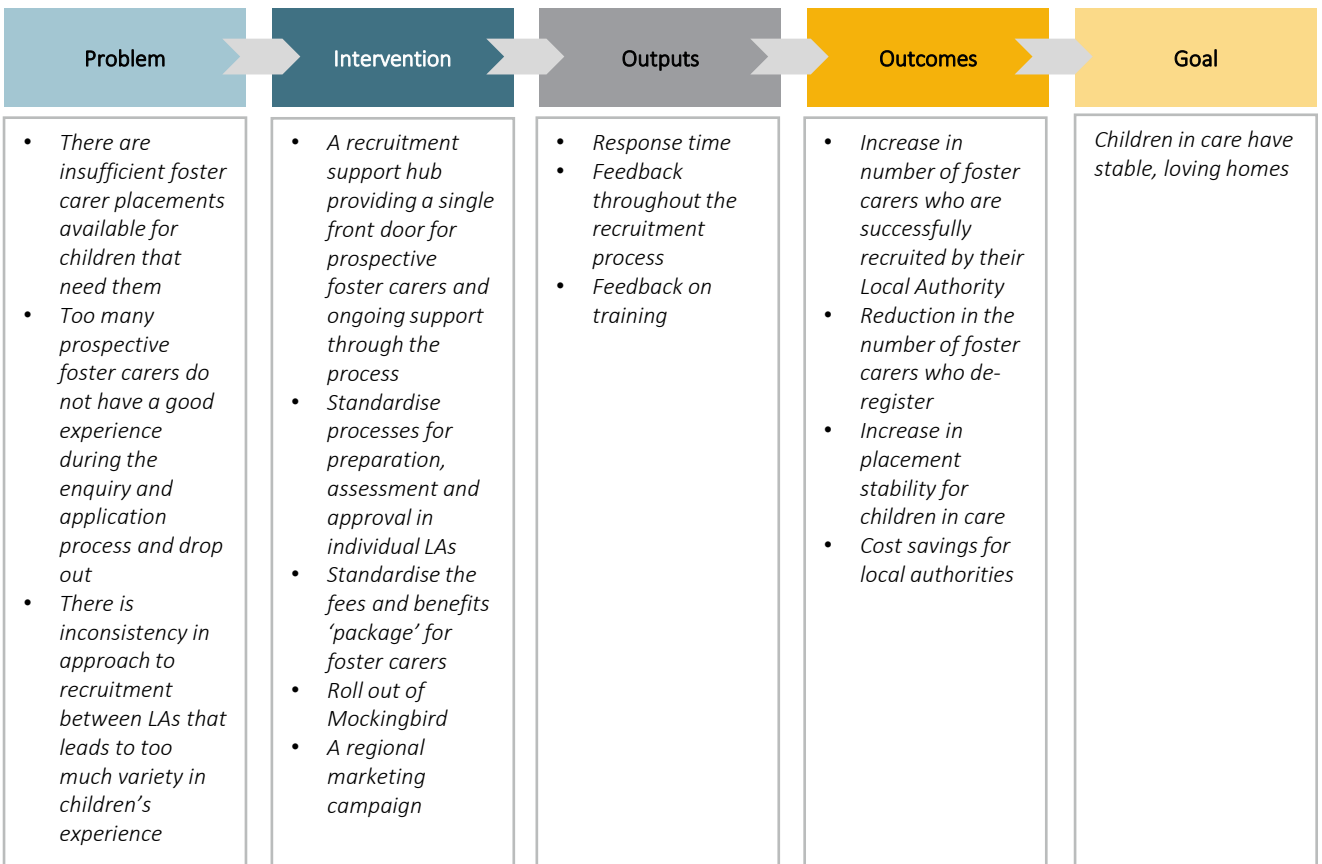
A theory of change is a logical framework connecting your vision to your activities, and what outcomes you want to achieve. It is a method of visually describing the change you want to see, and the steps to making it happen. It forces you to take a clear view and capture the key aspects of what you do.

Key questions when creating a theory of change are:

- **Problem:** What is the problem we want to solve?
- **Intervention:** What will we do to address them?
- **Outputs:** What are the measurable effects of our work?
- **Outcomes:** What are the benefits of our work?
- **Goal:** What is the long term change we want to see?



Theory of Change Template





1.4 Governance

Establishing a clear governance structure will be crucial for your fostering Recruitment Support Hub. Everyone needs to be clear about what decisions need to be taken, by who and when, and how they will be held to account.

Establishing a clear governance structure before the implementation phase ensures that the project benefits from:

- Strategic leadership at a senior level (i.e. the DCS from each LA involved in the hub)
- A shared understanding of who is responsible/accountable for each aspect of the project
- Clear lines of accountability between the strategic and operational levels of the project
- Clear lines of delegation between strategic and operational levels to enable delivery and innovation at pace
- A shared sense of what decisions need to be taken, by who and when
- A clear way in which project progress, risks and issues will be monitored
- Escalation routes, so that risks and issues can be resolved quickly once identified



Terms of Reference Templates

1. [Project Board](#)
2. [Operational Working Group](#)



The North East Pathfinder

Initially, the North East Pathfinder used the ADCS regional board as their main route for decision making. As the project and governance needs developed, this was supported by a more regular NEP Project Board which took on responsibility for key decision-making. This was chaired by the DCS for the lead authority – Sunderland City Council.

Key questions to consider:

- What should the governance structure look like, and what levels of strategic and operational decision-making are required?
- Who will provide strategic leadership and act as ‘chairperson’ within the governance structure?
- Are DCSs from all LAs sighted on the project and signed up?
- Who will need to be engaged at each level of governance?
- What decisions will be made at different levels of governance?
- How frequently will elements of your governance structure meet?
- How will you ensure your governance is robust, but does not limit delivery day-to-day?
- How will you ensure Lead Members are sighted as needed?

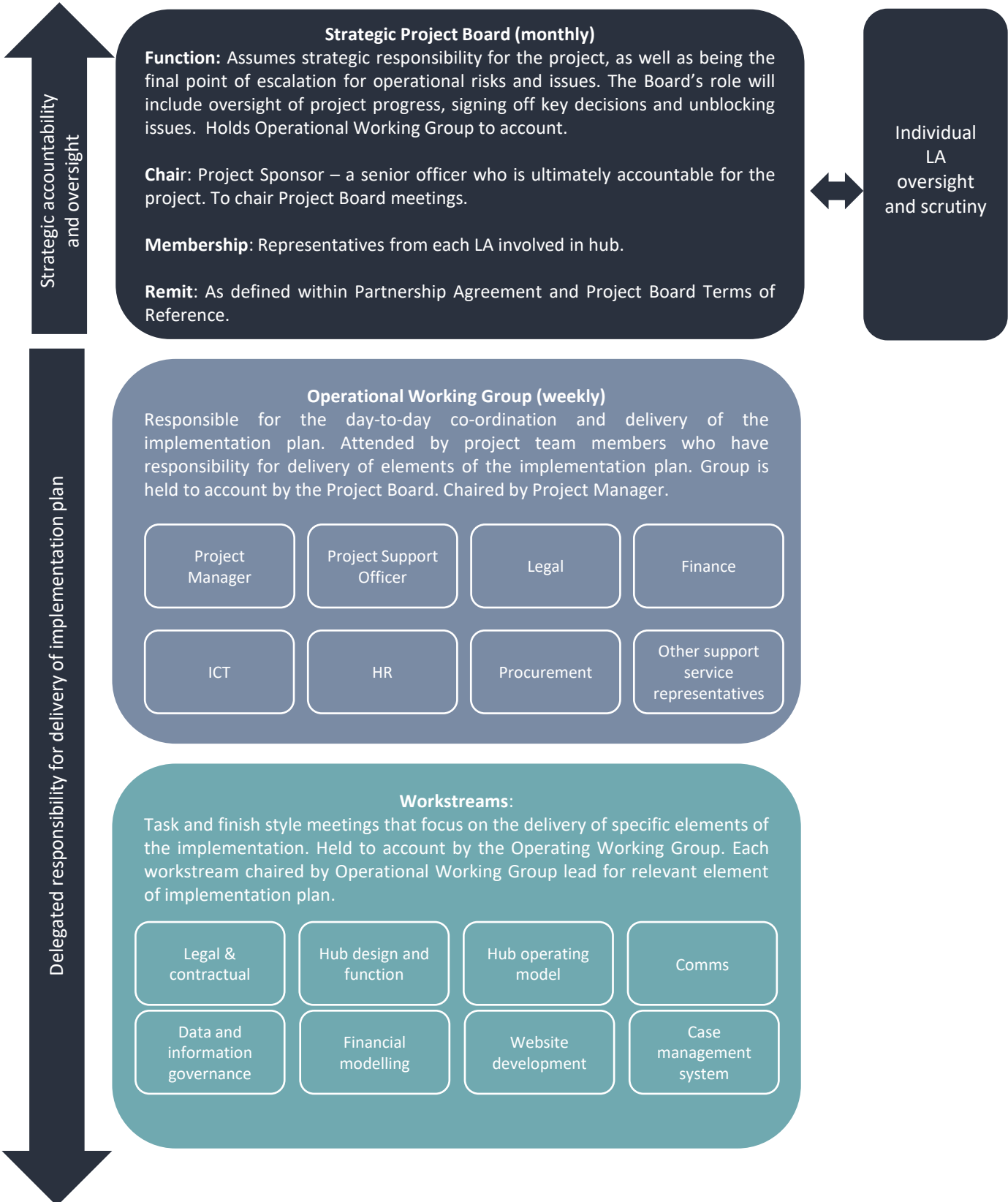




Define



Project Governance Structure Example





1.5 Leadership

To deliver a Recruitment Support Hub, you will need strong strategic and operational leadership.

Strategic leadership

It is important to think about what you need from senior leaders to help shape your transformation and ensure that expectations for the project are understood and acknowledged across the region. You should identify a senior project sponsor who will take the lead across the region and champion the project. This should be a Director for Children's Services. Having a strong project sponsor will enable you to drive forward delivery and address challenges at a strategic level.

Key questions to consider when identifying strategic leadership:

- How can you select a project sponsor with the experience, credibility and relationships to lead across the region?
- How will this leadership role align with your governance structure?
- What will the leader's role be in anticipating and managing change within partner local authorities?
- How will you ensure senior leaders in local authorities are consistently engaging with their fostering teams?



The North East Pathfinder

Jill Colbert, Director of Children's Services in Sunderland and Chief Executive for Together for Children, has played a critical and active role in the progress of the North East Pathfinder. Using the region's DCS network, Jill engaged directly with Directors and council Chief Executives to emphasize messages around the importance of a strong regional culture and collaboration, not competition. Her efforts were pivotal in cultivating a culture of positivity and inclusion across the region and securing commitment to the collaboration agreement.

Operational leadership

The role of a hub manager, will be crucial to ensure you can successfully deliver your recruitment support hub and run it on an ongoing basis. You should recognise that a hub manager is a new role within children's services.

Your recruitment support hub manager will need to be effective at engaging existing local authority fostering team managers and the staff in your recruitment support hub. A key part of this will be managing change within the region and providing support to existing staff who may have questions or concerns.

During implementation, you should consider how the project manager and hub manager will work together and clearly define their roles and responsibilities. See 1.7 for information about the role of the project manager.

Key questions to consider when identifying your hub manager are:

- What do you need from the role, and what qualifications, skills or experience will they need?
- How will a hub manager fit within existing local authority staffing structures?
- How will a hub manager work with your project manager?
- What support will you need to put around them to ensure they can perform the role effectively?



[Draft Job Description for Recruitment Support Hub Service Manager](#)



1.6 Formalising Your Working Arrangements

To support regional working, you will need to have an agreement in place which articulates how you will work together as a group of local authorities.

This could be a partnership agreement (more formal and structured) or a collaboration agreement (more informal and flexible). Your agreement should define the scope of the project and clarify the roles and responsibilities of the local authorities involved.

Key questions to consider:

- Do you have existing collaboration or partnership agreements which enable regional working?
- When do you need the collaboration agreement complete?
- Who will lead the development of your partnership / collaboration agreement?
- How will you ensure legal colleagues from all local authorities are sighted on the agreement?
- What are the sign-off processes and timelines for securing agreement from individual local authorities?



The North East Pathfinder

The North East experienced particular challenges in obtaining LA signatures for their collaboration agreement due to the timescales available and the length and varied approval processes across the region. Some LAs required formal cabinet approval, and local elections were due to take place during this time, meaning future cabinet meeting dates were uncertain. The project manager advised that deadlines were tight for coproduction between regional legal and operational colleagues, and more collaborative workshop sessions would have been preferred had time allowed.



[Collaboration Agreement Template from the North East Pathfinder](#)

1.7 Project Resourcing

To successfully implement your recruitment support hub, you will need to have the right staff in place during the design and implementation phase.

You will need a Project Manager who has responsibility for project delivery. Activities will include oversight of project planning, relationship management, and overview of the project budget.



[Draft Job Description for Recruitment Support Hub Programme Manager](#)

Further questions on resourcing the project during design and implementation include:

- Is additional project support required?
- Do you need to recruit staff?
- Who will employ project staff?
- Who will manage the recruitment of project staff?
- Do you have clear job descriptions, with defined roles and responsibilities?
- What mitigations will be in place if recruitment is not successful?
- What will be the Project Manager's role once the hub is launched?
- In terms of the wider project team, are individuals across key areas of the project (Finance, ICT, procurement, HR, premises etc.) aware of the need to support this project?
- What will their role be?
- Will these individuals be available to attend Operational Working Group meetings?
- Will they have the capacity to support this project (i.e. progressing with actions)?



Learning from the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA) Programme

Identifying leads in each local authority for key project areas such as IT and HR was crucial when implementing RAAs.



1.8 Project Planning

Underpinning any successful project is a comprehensive project plan. The plan should break down activities into manageable chunks and describe timescales and resources. It is a vital tool to managing the project, and reporting progress through the governance structure.

A robust plan should set out tasks and milestones including:

- Go live date
- Decision making points, including around political oversight and budget setting
- Engagement with foster carers and care experienced people
- Agreeing design of the delivery model and governance
- All key implementation tasks
- An understanding of the 'critical path' to completion, so that tasks can be prioritised
- Who is responsible or will complete each task
- Resource required to complete key implementation tasks, to inform your budget
- Stakeholder mapping and internal communications plan

You should consider how will you review your project plan as you work through the implementation phase.



[Implementation Plan & Risk Register Template](#)

1.9 Project Budget

A robust budget will enable you to allocate resources effectively and ensure your Recruitment Support Hub is affordable. Your project budget should include one-time implementation costs. See 2.4 in the Implementation phase for guidance on ongoing operational costs.

Your project budget should be informed by your implementation plan, including the resource responsible for tasks and the time you've estimated it will take to deliver tasks.

Key areas of spend will include:

Implementation cost areas
Leadership / oversight
Project Management
Service design
Professional advice e.g. legal, HR, finance
IT solutions including website and case management system
Foster carer / care experienced children input
Project costs e.g. resources, room hire
Implementation staff e.g. user researcher, comms
Hub staff



[Financial Costings template](#)



[Relational Project Management](#)

Relational project management puts human relationships at the centre of projects. It is about establishing and embedding the conditions to get the best out of people.

It is based on Mutual Ventures' experience of running projects over more than decade, working with colleagues across central government, local authorities and the NHS.

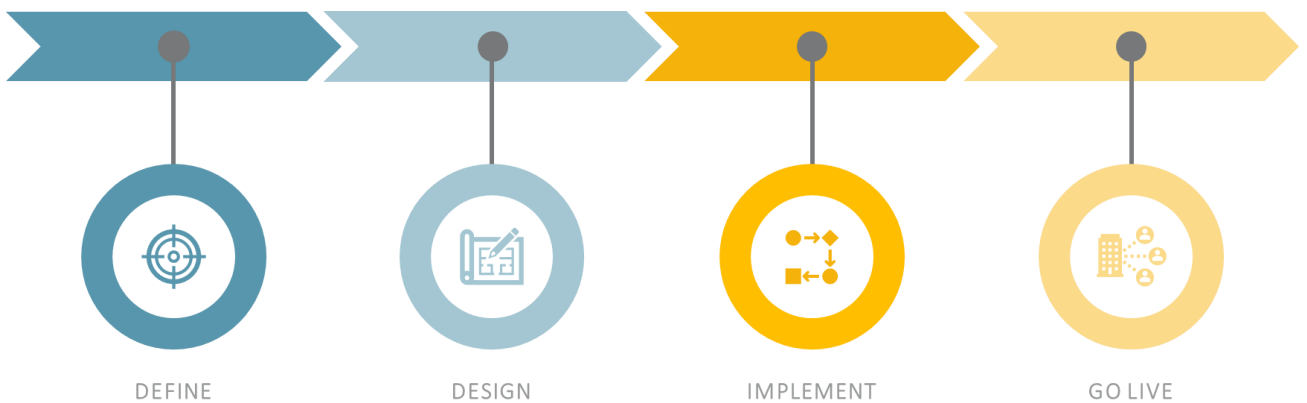
To learn more about this approach and what it means for managing your project, read our report [here](#).





2. Design

- 2.1 Hub Design
- 2.2 User Journey Mapping
- 2.3 Hub Staffing
- 2.4 Ongoing Budget
- 2.5 Case Management
- 2.6 Website
- 2.7 Telephony
- 2.8 Key Technical Considerations





2.1 Hub Design

A key task is developing and agreeing the design of the services to be delivered by your Recruitment Support Hub. This is a significant piece of work and will take multiple workshops and discussions to finalise.

Before you start, think about who you will engage in the design process. How will you engage staff from across the local authorities, as well as foster carers and care experienced young people where appropriate?

It is also helpful to capture and map current fostering recruitment processes across the local authorities in your region. This will highlight key similarities and differences, what is already working well that could be incorporated into your Recruitment Support Hub, as well as challenges that the hub needs to address.



Fostering Service Information Gathering Form

Section 1 focuses on recruitment processes. Questions can be adapted for a survey, workshop or one-to-one conversations.

Key hub design questions include:

- What are the functions of the hub?
- How will enquiries be recorded and processed in the hub?
- What approach will the hub take to the initial screening of prospective foster carers?
- Who will conduct initial home visits?
- What are the handover points in the hub process?
- How will you ensure a seamless transition for prospective foster carers between the hub and individual LAs?
- What is the package of support offered by the hub?
- What are the agreed standards of practice for the hub?
- What role will foster carers play in the hub?
- How can the demand for foster carers (see 1.1 Understanding your Fostering Recruitment & Retention Needs) be best met through the service?



The North East Pathfinder

Foster carers will play a key role in the North East Pathfinder's hub, 'Foster with North East'. They have established a buddy scheme to link prospective foster carers with existing foster carers at the point of enquiry. Experienced carers also support with exit interviews, to help understand why people drop out of the process and where the hub can improve. Experienced carers are also supporting their Skills to Foster training.



Foster carer retention and recruitment in England: Key research findings and recommendations (May 2023)



Based on their recent research into foster carer retention and recruitment in England, the Fostering Network (2023) recommended that fostering services consider the following principles when reviewing their application processes:

- **Lived experience:** young people and foster carers should be involved throughout the recruitment and approval process.
- **Quality relationships:** limit the number of social workers that prospective foster carers work with, from initial contact through to matching.
- **Flexibility:** the assessment should consider the needs and schedules of the applicant.
- **Transparency:** about what the process entails, how long it is expected to take and the support available.
- **After an application is withdrawn:** Fostering services should seek the relevant permissions to store the details of and keep in touch with people who enquire to foster but don't submit or withdraw an application.

The Fostering Network also recommended introducing and evaluating **buddying/mentoring schemes** to offer wrap-around support to prospective foster carers during the approval process.



2.2 User Journey Mapping

User journey mapping can be a useful tool for ensuring that the experiences and perspectives of prospective foster carers accessing the services are driving the design of your Recruitment Support Hub.

Creating a user journey map will help you to understand the requirements and practicalities of the hub, including the required staffing structure.

It will also highlight parts of the journey where there are gaps or unanswered questions to address.

Key elements to consider during the user journey mapping process:

- Actions – the behaviours and steps taken by users including the prospective foster carers, the hub and local authorities
- Mindsets – the user’s thoughts, questions, motivations and information needs at different stages in the journey
- Requirements – what is needed to be in place for each action in the journey

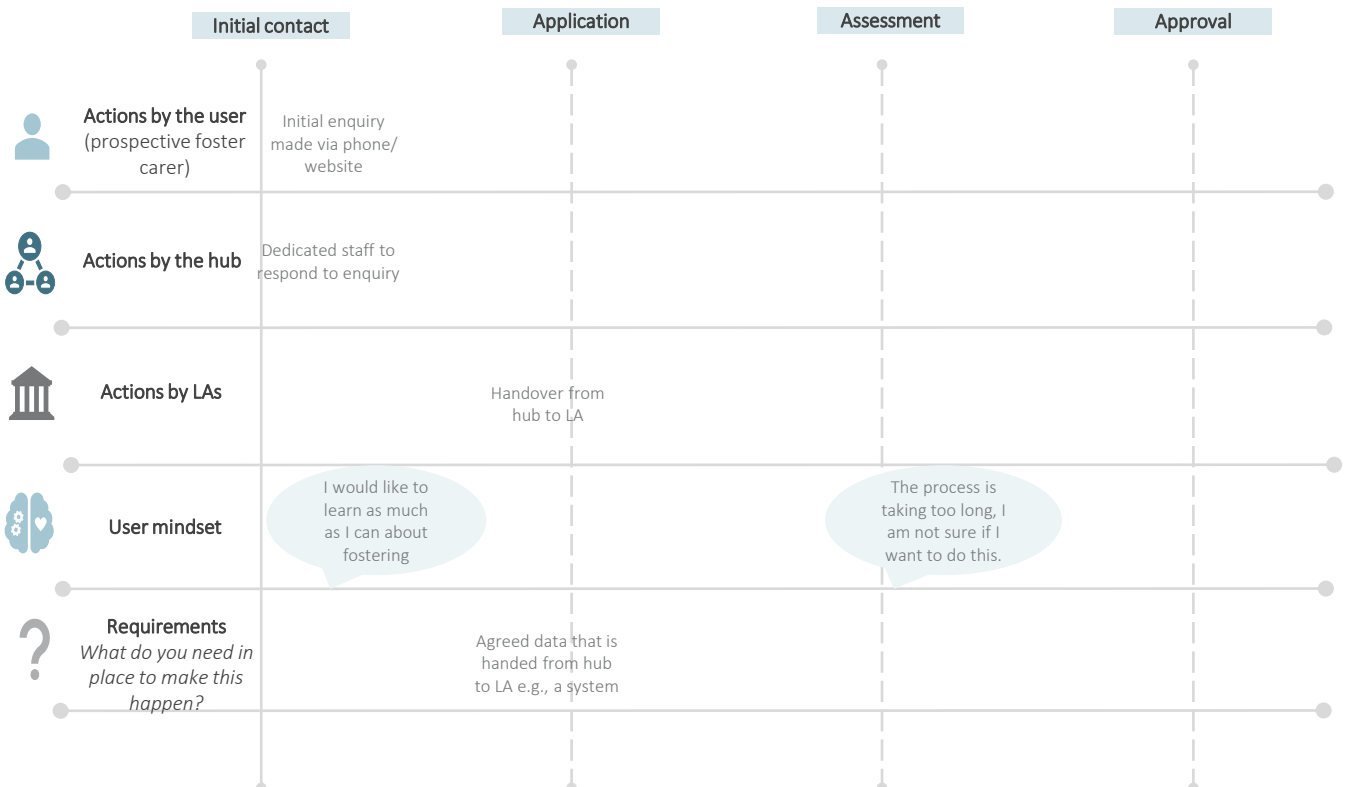
You can also consider:

- Staff capabilities – different skills and responsibilities required by staff at different stages of the process
- Information – the information required at different stages of the recruitment process
- Technology – the technology required to support the recruitment process



User Journey Mapping Exercise

Example user journey template:





2.3 Hub Staffing

Your Recruitment Support Hub will require a robust staffing structure, with the right expertise to ensure you can deliver the right support for prospective foster carers. Key areas to consider in designing this are laid out below.

Staffing structure:

- What is the level of demand experienced by local authorities and how many staff process these?
- How many enquiries from prospective foster carers are you aiming for, and how do you intend to manage these?
- How will you ensure sufficient social work oversight of hub activities?
- What other skills will you need in your hub around communications, marketing and data analysis?
- What is the role for foster carers?



Fostering Service Information Gathering Form

To support the design of your staffing structure, it is helpful to capture and map existing staff structures across the local authorities in your region. Section 2 focuses on understanding your existing staff structures. These questions can be adapted for a survey, workshop or one-to-one conversations.

Staffing methods

As part of their operational model, hubs should consider how they wish to staff the service. Options include recruitment through advertised vacancies, secondment, or transferring staff from other local authorities.

Transferring staff is completed through a process known as TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment), which protects the terms and conditions of those moving from another local authority. This should be undertaken with legal advice

Key questions include:

- Who will manage the recruitment of hub staff?
- Who will be the employer of staff working within the hub?
- What mitigations or options will you have in place if recruitment is not successful?
- Have job descriptions and personal specifications been developed for each role?
- What type of contract/T&Cs will you recruit staff on and what is the impact of this? Are staff transferring employer? Will TUPE apply?

Impact on existing staff:

- What will the impact be on existing staff carrying out similar / the same roles?
- How will you engage staff so they understand the programme and how it will impact their work?
- Do new hub staff require training?



The North East Pathfinder

The North East Pathfinder analysed data to project demand and structure staffing for their regional Recruitment Support Hub. They decided on a team of six – one Service Manager, one Fostering Assistant, a Data Support Officer and three experienced social workers.

Key pieces of advice from the North East Pathfinder include:

- Ensuring your Hub Manager and team are in post before the Recruitment Support Hub goes live to support staff training and team building.
- Opting for permanent positions helped the North East attract skilled social workers, which were important for the structure of their hub model.



2.4 Ongoing Budget

Developing a budget is an important part of the design process and helps you understand all the costs associated with running your Recruitment Support Hub.

The process of developing a budget is valuable as it prompts you to ask questions and look in detail at all areas of expenditure. It also means that local authority partners all have a clear understanding of likely costs. Projected budgets should be produced for a minimum of three years.

Key questions to consider:

- What are the key areas of cost associated with running a Recruitment Support Hub?
- What costs are fixed? What costs are variable, and what is the likely magnitude in these areas?
- What risks does the hub face and what is the potential financial impact of these risks?
- Is it appropriate to consider whether cost savings might be identified through a regional approach?
- Where will local authorities continue to spend individually, such as on marketing?

Key areas of spend will include:

Leadership / governance
Staffing, inc. Involvement of foster carers
Communications and campaigning, inc. website
Case management system
Training and development
Back office support costs, including ICT



The North East Pathfinder

The North East developed detailed ongoing costs as they iterated their hub design and recruited staff. These costings have informed a business case on the cost-benefit analysis of the hub and proposals for its continuation.

2.5 Case Management

Your recruitment support hub will need to manage and track enquiries coming in through the front door, and pass these to local authorities in your region for them to conduct assessments.

Key questions to consider when identifying the technology you need to manage and track enquiries:

- What case management systems do local authorities use currently?
- Do you need to procure a new system, or develop an existing system?
- Does capability exist in-house in local authorities in the region to develop what is required to track enquiries or will external support be required?
- If you are procuring a new system, how will this be done and what are the timelines?
- What data is currently collected from prospective foster carers at different stages?
- What data will you need to collect to track prospective foster carers through the hub and to handover enquiries to local authorities?
- What requirements does a case management system need to meet?
- Who will develop your specification for a case management system?
- How will data be collected in your case management system support reporting?
- Who will support and manage your case management system on an ongoing basis?



The North East Pathfinder

The North East Pathfinder worked with web system partners GOSS Interactive to develop a bespoke case management system to monitor and track hub enquiries. GOSS also developed their website, enabling website and the case management system integration.



2.6 Website

Your Recruitment Support Hub will need a clear and informative website for prospective foster carers.

This should provide a simple route for foster carers to submit enquiries and provide information about fostering in your region and the local authorities involved in your hub, without confusing foster carers.

To ensure you get your website right, you can test existing websites with foster carers and care experienced people to see what works well currently and what could be improved. As you develop your hub website requirements and its content, engage foster carers throughout so the final website you develop meets the need of foster carers, not what you think they want to know.

Key questions to consider when designing your recruitment support hub website:

- What do local authorities currently provide on their websites?
- What do existing foster carers think about existing fostering websites? What do they like? What do they think could be improved?
- How do local authorities currently maintain and update their websites?
- Where will your recruitment support hub website be hosted?
- Will you adapt an existing website or procure a new website? How much would this cost?
- How will local authority fostering websites link to the new recruitment support hub website and not add confusion for prospective foster carers?
- How will your website link to your case management system?
- Will you have a form on your website for foster carers to enquire?
- Will you need automation built into your website?
- How will you make your website accessible for prospective foster carers who have a disability?

2.7 Telephony

In addition to your website, your recruitment support hub will also need a phoneline for prospective foster carers to contact your hub.

You should consider how your telephony will support the single front door of your recruitment support hub. For example, how will you divert existing local authority phone numbers to a new recruitment hub phone number.

Key questions to consider:

- How do local authorities currently answer telephone enquiries?
- How do current foster carers experience telephony?
- Will your Recruitment Support Hub need a new phone number?
- How would the Recruitment Support Hub phoneline
- Will existing local authority phonelines redirect to the Recruitment Support Hub?
- How could existing or new technology solutions support with setting up your phoneline?
- Do you have capability in your region to support with setting up a phoneline or do you need external support?
- How will telephone enquiries out of hours be recorded?
- How will you monitor and continually test the system is working? Via weekly checks?



The North East Pathfinder

In early design plans, the North East Pathfinder hub design did not include a telephone number, as online self-service is so popular. This was later reconsidered, and Foster with North East now have their own 0800 number.



[Foster with North East website](#)



2.8 Key Technical Considerations

Establishing a shared service requires local authorities to think through legal, regulatory, and tax implications.

This page briefly describes these key issues and the questions that clusters should think about when setting up their hubs. *Note that this is intended to provide an overview of key areas and does not constitute legal advice.*

Legal basis for shared services

Hubs should understand the legal basis of their plans to create a shared service. The Local Government Act 1972 sets out the following principles for these arrangements:

- one local authority cannot subsidise another local authority
- local authorities can delegate functions to other local authorities, but the delegating authority remains ultimately responsible for the execution of the functions
- Section 102 makes a provision for local authorities to establish joint committees to discharge their functions. (Joint committees usually involve a legal agreement signed by the participating local authorities.)
- Section 113 allows local authorities to place an officer at the disposal of another local authority for the purposes of discharging the latter's functions

Organisation form

Whilst all existing Recruitment Support Hubs have been established as a shared service, hosted by one local authority, clusters have the option to establish a separate legal entity to deliver the services. This could take the form of a local authority trading company.

When establishing new legal entities, local authorities will need to agree arrangements for ownership, governance and procurement of services. This should be undertaken with clear legal advice.

Regulation

Recruitment Support Hubs should consider the extent to which they are likely to be subject to inspection by Ofsted.

Ofsted's remit is to inspect and regulate activities involving care for children, including fostering services. In particular, in the case of recruitment, services subject to regulation are those that involve the assessment and evaluation of prospective foster carers, including visits, checking references, making the initial 'stage 1' decision, and panels.

As services hosted by local authorities, those hubs that do provide services subject to regulation will not require separate registration as a fostering agency. If a cluster establishes a new legal entity and is providing such services, registration will be required.

Tax

Where Recruitment Support Hubs are 'hosted' by a local authority, there are unlikely to be any tax implications.

Where a Recruitment Support Hub is exploring establishing a new legal entity for the service (e.g. a local authority trading company), there will be a VAT liability.

Depending on their chosen structure and operating model, other forms of tax that may be relevant to look at include corporation tax, business rates and Stamp Duty Land Tax.



Data Protection

Recruitment Support Hubs will require local authorities to share data they have not done previously.

Engaging your Data Protection Officer early in the design phase will allow you to explore the data protection impacts of your Recruitment Support Hub and identify risks early. Your Data Protection Officer will be able to help you navigate the data protection legislation and regulations.

You should also begin drafting a Data Protection Information Assessment (DPIA) to assess and demonstrate your data protection obligations.

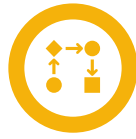
A DPIA is a process designed to help you systematically analyse, identify and minimise the data protection risks of a project or plan. It is a key part of your accountability obligations under the UK GDPR, and when done properly helps you assess and demonstrate how you comply with all of your data protection obligations.

A DPIA will not necessarily eradicate all risk but should help you minimise and determine whether or not the level of risk is acceptable in the circumstances, taking into account the benefits you want to achieve.

There is no definitive DPIA template you must follow. You may want to use the Information Commissioner's Office's DPIA template or adapt an existing template for your Recruitment Support Hub.

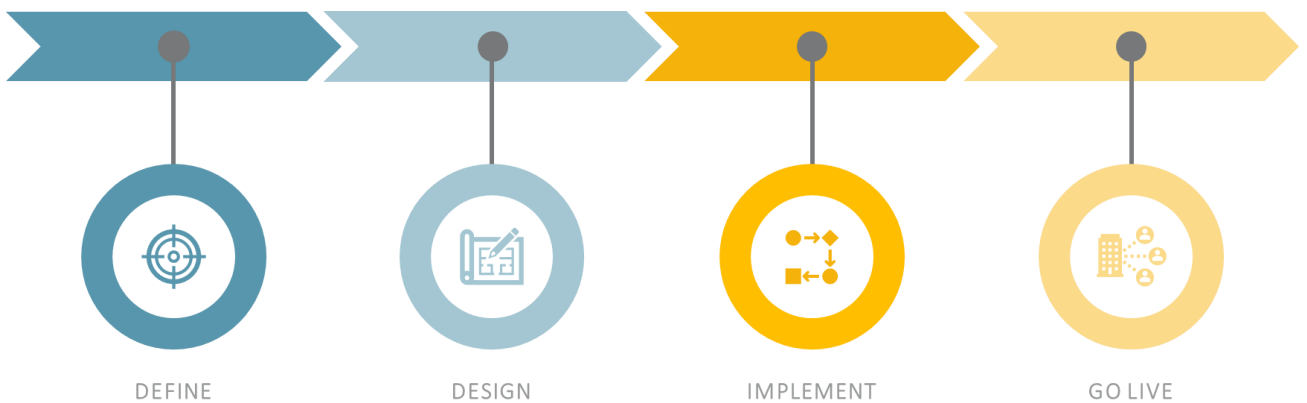


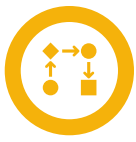
[Information Commissioner's Office DPIA template](#)



3. Implement

- 3.1 Managing Risks & Change
- 3.2 Project Communications
- 3.3 External hub communications and marketing
- 3.4 Monitoring & Tracking Performance
- 3.5 Managing your data





Implementation



3.1 Managing risks and change

Alongside your implementation plan, you should identify project risks and issues, and how they link to your implementation plan.

Risk types include operational, financial, security and safety, regulatory and compliance, reputational and quality control.

It is important to take a proactive approach to risk and issue management, which means risks are identified and mitigated early on.

A risk register with mitigation strategies should be maintained by the Project Manager and be reviewed at your regular project boards.

Your approach to governance should also articulate escalation routes, so that risks and issues can be resolved quickly once identified.



[Implementation Plan & Risk Register Template](#)

Example risk register template:

Risk	Description	Owner	Likelihood (1=low; 3=high)	Impact (1=low; 3=high)	Risk score	Mitigating actions
Tight timeframe for delivery	If decisions are not made quickly within the tight timescales of the project, there would be delays to project delivery.	Project Sponsor	2	3	6	Clear implementation plan with regular reviews and risk monitoring by the Project Board.
Change in leadership	If leadership, such as the Director of Children's Services changes in a local authority, new leaders may lack understanding of the project or its ambition and buy-in to the project could be lost.	Project Sponsor	2	2	4	Each local authorities lead engaging with the Project Board should ensure strong awareness of the remit of the recruitment support hub and impact on existing local authority fostering services to avoid disagreement. The Project Sponsor should quickly build relationships with new leaders.
Unable to agree contents of partnership agreement	If local authorities are not able to agree on the contents of the partnership agreement within the agreed timescales, this could stop the recruitment support hub going live.	Project Sponsor	1	3	3	Ensure there is a strong leadership commitment to participate in coproduction for project activities such as the partnership agreement, within clear timescales.
Local Authority wants to leave the cluster	A local authority could want to leave the cluster during implementation having an impact on the funding from DfE and the aims of the recruitment support hub.	Project Sponsor	2	3	6	Clear stakeholder understanding of the project benefits at all levels of each organisation from the outset of the project. Strong relationships maintained at leadership level by the Project Sponsor.



Implementation



3.2 Project Communications

Clear and consistent ongoing communications around the set-up of the Recruitment Support Hub is vital to ensure a successful project, a smooth transition of service and continuous fostering recruitment. A key first step is identifying a communications lead and developing a comprehensive plan to engage all stakeholders.

Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholder mapping is an approach to create a clear understanding of the people and groups impacted by the project, and allow a plan to be developed for each group. When undertaking this mapping, you will need to consider the following audiences:

- Staff that will be working for the Recruitment Support Hub
- Staff that will remain in the Council but continue working on fostering recruitment and retention, including fostering leadership and management
- Staff working in children's services
- All Council staff
- Existing foster carers
- Prospective foster carers
- Care experienced young people
- Politicians
- Local networks, such as ADCS
- Partners, including IFAs and local voluntary sector groups

Communications plan

Once you have mapped your stakeholders, you can develop an outline communications plan. A communications plan should describe type and regularity of communication required for each stakeholder group – both during the implementation of the hub and after go live.

Key questions include:

- What communications are local authorities currently delivering?
- How will local authority communication link to Recruitment Support Hub communication?
- How will you communicate about the new Recruitment Support Hub and the impact it will have on each stakeholder group?
- What communication channels and activities will you use?

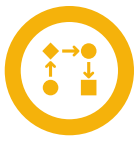


Examples of Internal Communication Channels

- **Newsletter:** The North East Pathfinder introduced a monthly project newsletter which provided drumbeat updates to the participating local authorities.
- **Information events:** Some clusters have held internal 'show and tell' events to share information on the project with colleagues from local authority fostering teams. This gives them the opportunity to ask questions about the hub, tackle worries and concerns and help introduce the regional vision.
- **One-to-one engagement:** Some clusters have offered one-to-one meetings with existing staff to answer specific questions or concerns. This has supported relationship building and provided a forum for existing staff to ask questions they might not feel comfortable asking in a wider forum.
- **Progress update emails:** Some clusters have provided updates on progress with delivery through weekly update emails. This enables them to contact a wider stakeholder group regularly.



[Stakeholder Mapping & Communications Plan template](#)



Implementation



3.3 External hub communications and marketing

External communications will be an important part of attracting prospective foster carers to your recruitment support hub. As you set up your recruitment support hub, you should consider what communications and marketing will be delivered at a regional level to direct enquiries to your recruitment support hub single front-door for the region.

Map existing local authority communications and marketing

At the outset, understand each local authorities existing communications campaigns to attract new foster carers. This will help you understand the drumbeat of communications in your region and where you may be able to target communications at a regional level, rather than in each individual local authority.

Key questions to consider:

- What communications campaigns are local authorities currently delivering?
- By which methods are communications campaigns delivered? Such as social media or TV.
- Are communications campaigns targeting specific groups or sufficiency challenges?
- How much money is each local authority spending on communications and marketing activity?
- Do local authorities understand the effectiveness of their current communications and marketing activities?
- What existing evidence do local authorities have about what communications and marketing activity drives enquiries?

Developing your regional communications and marketing strategy

As part of developing your recruitment support hub, you should consider what communications and marketing will be delivered at a regional level to attract new foster carers. This will involve identifying your regional brand, such as 'Foster with North East' and what communications activity you want to deliver at a regional level.

Key questions include:

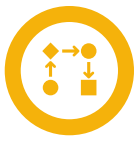
- Who are your target audience and how well do you understand them? For example, understanding the demographics of carers you want to attract, their motivations, barriers and media consumption
- What communications and marketing should be delivered by the hub?
- How will communications and marketing at a regional level complement local authority activities?
- Who will be involved in the development of regional communications and marketing?
- What do you want the hub branding and marketing to look like and say?
- Do you have existing capacity in the region to develop this marketing or do you need to identify a delivery partner to support this?
- Do you have an existing regional campaign you want to build on?
- What needs to change in local authority communications to direct prospective foster carers to the hub?

Testing your communications and marketing with foster carers

As you develop your communications and marketing materials, you should build in time to test these with existing foster carers. This will ensure you can test what images, wording and branding stand out to foster carers in your region.

Understanding the effectiveness of your communications and marketing

From the outset of designing your communications and marketing for your hub, consider how you will measure its effectiveness. You will need to understand where new enquiries have come from, such as regional or local campaigns.



3.4 Monitoring and Tracking Performance

Tracking data and reporting on the performance of your Recruitment Support Hub is critical to ensure you understand the effectiveness of your approach and can communicate the benefits to stakeholders.

Key questions to consider:

- Have you identified a performance lead?
- What data will the hub collect? How different is this from what is already being collected by LAs?
- Do you have a baseline of current performance for your region? Does this include baselines above and beyond the annual Ofsted data?
- Can you use existing systems or do you need a new case management system? See section 2.5
- If you procure a new system, is there a requirement to work alongside or integrate with existing systems?
- What key performance indicators (KPIs) will your recruitment support hub have?
- What reporting software do you have, is it compatible with your case management system?
- How do you ensure data quality and accuracy?
- Have you checked you can collect data for your performance indicators?
- How will your performance indicators add value either by demonstrating impact or managing performance?
- Have you identified metrics which will enable you to identify if the hub is effective and support long-term funding decisions?



Regional Hub Intelligence Tool

The purpose of this tool is to help local authority clusters ask questions about performance, provide access to public data in a regional format, and allow areas to compare themselves. It also has a feature allowing hubs to monitor their in-year recruitment performance.

The tool is based on publicly available data from Ofsted and Department for Education.

Example KPIs

- Increase in the number of initial enquiries by prospective foster carer by %
- % of initial visits done within x days of the enquiry
- Improve the conversion rate from enquiry to application by %
- Improve the conversion rate from application to approval by %
- Increase in the number of approved foster carers by %
- Number of households deregistered
- Increase in the overall number of foster carers
- Timeliness of the recruitment process:
 - Enquiry to initial response in X
 - Enquiry to initial visit in X
 - Enquiry to application in X
 - Assessment and assessment to approval in X
- Foster carer satisfaction via feedback
- Effectiveness of hub recruitment campaigns:
 - Engagement metrics
 - Website/social media insights
 - Attendees at events/open days
- Number of training sessions delivered/attendees
- Increase in the number of foster placements delivered in-house by LAs within the cluster to meet the needs of all children.

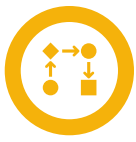


The North East Pathfinder

The North East Pathfinder developed a Microsoft Power Bi dashboard to report on recruitment support hub performance, including contacts received, enquiries, EOIs authorised, and referrals to LA. This is shared with a range of key stakeholders each month.



Foster with North East Data Dashboard



3.5 Managing Your Data

Managing and maintaining your data securely will be vital to ensure confidence in your Recruitment Support Hub and to ensure you meet legal requirements.

Managing and demonstrating accountability for data is also a legal obligation under the Data Protection Act 2018 and UK GDPR. It also demonstrates to your foster carers that you are trusted to look after their personal information.

Key questions to consider;

- What personal data will you be collecting in the recruitment support hub and sharing with local authorities?
- Have you completed your Data Protection Impact Assessment (see section 2.8)?
- Who will be responsible for developing a Data Sharing Agreement for the recruitment support hub?
- Who will be the Data Controller and Data Processor?
- What processes and safeguards will be in place to ensure safe and appropriate use of information?



Example of an Information Sharing Agreement from the North East Pathfinder

Alongside their Information Sharing Agreement, the North East Pathfinder maintain supplementary guidance providing the detail around the data exchange processes between local authorities and the recruitment support hub. This provides the specifics needed to ensure ISA compliance.

Data sharing agreement

The data sharing agreement for your recruitment support hub should set out:

- What information is shared
- That the information shared is accurate
- That the information shared follows agreed formats
- How it considers retention and deletion of shared information
- How information is to be shared and what data breach arrangements are
- How staff will be trained on using information and understanding their responsibilities
- How you will deal with requests for information from the public including Subject Access Requests and complaints
- How you will review the data sharing agreement
- What will happen if the agreement is terminated and how shared data will be deleted

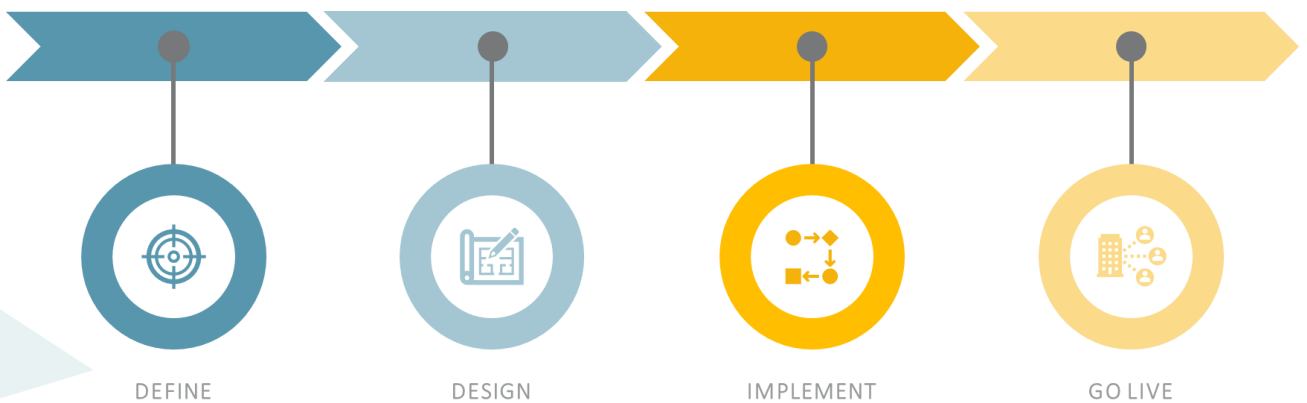
Key questions to consider:

- Who will complete your data sharing agreement and implement the actions?
- If you are a host authority for the recruitment support hub, what additional data management responsibilities do you have on behalf of the region?
- Have you ensured you are only collecting information you need?
- Where will you publish information on how you manage prospective foster carers data in line with UK GDPR? Will this be on your recruitment support hub website?



4. Go Live

- 4.1 Launch Communications
- 4.2 Celebrating 'Go Live'
- 4.3 Business As Usual
- 4.4 Sustainability planning





'Go live' describes the moment that the new fostering Recruitment Support Hub becomes fully operational, with all necessary preparations complete.

'Go live' should include the following:

- A hub website that is live and accessible to the public
- A single brand for foster carer recruitment in place across all local authorities
- All fostering recruitment enquiries are received by the hub, with individual local authorities diverting any enquiries that come directly to them
- All hub staff are in post
- System for data capture and monitoring in place
- Governance finalised and board meeting regularly

4.1 Launch Communications

To drive enquiries to your recruitment support hub a regional communications campaign needs to be launched so the new service is well-communicated within children's services across the region, as well as to partners. Communications should include clear, consistent and positive messaging, explaining what the changes mean for people. This should include a press announcement of the launch of the hub and a finalised schedule of marketing activities.

Tools to communicate can include newsletters, team meetings, council intranet, face-to-face talks or team visits by hub staff.

4.2 Celebrating launch

Local authority clusters should think about what they can do to celebrate the launch of the new service. Marking the launch – and all the hard work to get to that point – can help set the tone for the new service and raise the profile within the region. Hubs may wish to think about hosting an event or commissioning additional merchandise.



The North East Pathfinder

The North East region chose to separate 'go live' from the 'launch' of the hub. Hub operations went live to ensure smooth functioning a full 24 hours before officially launching (i.e. sharing a press release and wider communications). An official in-person 'launch event' was considered but deemed unnecessary, as the press releases and planned media activity were deemed sufficient to capture public attention.

Foster with North East was featured on ITV's Tyne Tees news and BBC Look North including an interview with one of the region's carers and with the project's Lead Director Jill Colbert, Together for Children's Chief Executive. Messages were shared about how anyone, regardless of background, can apply to foster.

4.3 Business As Usual

After launch hubs enter the phase of business as usual where the service must stand on its own two feet and meet the expected quality standard.

This requires a new way of thinking, transitioning from a project environment to continuous service provision. The Service Director will take over full responsibility from the project manager, reporting through the agreed governance structures. Hubs should think about how their governance structures may need to change to monitor, review and evaluate the performance of their recruitment support hub during business as usual.

Hubs may find that there are a small number of tasks that remain outstanding at the point they launch. These 'snagging' issues should not be forgotten and carefully planned with timetables for completion set.

4.4 Sustainability planning

Hubs will need to consider the business case for investment to ensure their long-term viability. These discussions should start as early as possible with finance and service leads.

Key to the case for investment will be robust evidence on impact – and how this differs from when services were managed by individual local authorities. In the first 6-12 months, impact should be visible from metrics including enquiries and applications. This will be followed by evidence on change in approvals and any knock-on impact on placement budgets.

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