





In the past five years the number of children in need of fostering in the UK has risen from 49,700 to more than 59,000. As two thirds of those currently providing this care are now approaching retirement age, almost 9,000 new foster homes must be found in order to avert a crisis this year. Five foster carers talk to **Caroline Scott** about their experiences. Illustration by **Darren Hopes**

OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN

Maria Catterick 42, has been a short-term foster carer since 2004. She is single and lives in the Tees Valley

A week after I'd been approved as a foster carer I had my first placement, so it was a bit of a baptism by fire. A social worker turned up with a little girl and thrust some paperwork into my hand. I remember feeling absolutely terrified that this child was now my responsibility. She was 11 but dressed in age-six clothes and carrying a red handbag with swear words written on it. She wore a little skirt that had never been ironed and her hair was so long you couldn't see what colour her eyes were. Together we put away the few clothes she came with and I tried to get to know her. She ran away constantly and she was partial to self-harm. She stole the first-aid box and hurt herself badly enough to need all the bandages and plasters. I didn't sleep well for the first month. But gradually we built up a relationship, and over the year she stayed with me she became the joy of my life.

For more than 20 years I worked with adults and children in the voluntary sector as a community development officer on short-term youth projects, but foster care seemed to me the place where you could make the

most difference to the course of a child's life. Children who come into care always have low self-esteem, so one of the first things I do is try to find something they're good at. I have no electronic games in the house, only board games, and I throw them into every club and activity I can find – their behaviour turns around once you fill their lives with exciting things.

I've had families of two, three and four siblings. It is a lot of work, but if I'm asked, how can I not keep them together? I've had a very beautiful four-and-a-half-pound baby and his teenage mum; I enjoyed helping her towards independence. And I've just had a three-year-old with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (if a mother binge drinks during early pregnancy, it can result in life-long physical, behavioural and learning disabilities in her baby). This little girl was disconnected from the world and herself. When she arrived she ran up and down my sitting-room until her legs gave out.

The agency I work for [Team Fostering] insists that if you're the main care giver, you mustn't work outside the home, because the children should be your priority. I look on it as a career. Sometimes I've earned very little, but at times I've earned more than I used to in the voluntary sector. Occasionally,

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I need to take a breather between children, so I budget. The children and I don't often go to the cinema, but it's just as much fun watching DVDs with a big bowl of popcorn at home.

You need to have a passion for children and an ability to overcome problems. Children push and push, but I'm not someone who easily loses the plot. My job is to help them on their way to a permanent home. If you grow up in an ordinary family, family stories are passed down; so when they leave I write a 'love letter', setting down all the things we did together, what it was like living with them, how much I gained from them. If they're babies, I put it on the social worker's file, so when they're older they'll be able to say, 'Yes, I was in the care system, but I had a good life and I was loved.'

My first child left me after a year to join her adoptive family, where she was very happy, but when she was 16 she called, and she's been in my life ever since. It's the daftest things she remembers. Bubble baths, cooking together, the car-boot sales where she found the Famous Five books she grew to love. She was challenging but she taught me such a lot. I always sign their letters, 'Love always and forever'. She said, 'I called because I knew you meant it. I always knew I could come back and find you.'

Louise Groves 35, spent part of her own childhood in care. She has fostered 45 children aged from newborn to 18 in the past nine years. She is single and lives in Essex

My childhood was pretty normal until I was 11, when my mum suffered a brain haemorrhage and fell into a coma. My dad worked on the oil rigs and my brother, Patrick, was away at college, so social services decided to send me to boarding school. Mum died a year later, my dad died when I was 14 and my brother when I was 16; both committed suicide. So within a few years I'd lost my entire family. I think I dealt with it all by shutting down; school became my home, the only thing that was constant. I remember it all hitting me when I found it hard to get a passport to go on a school trip. It arrived with a note stating I was legally an orphan. To see that word written down was indescribably awful.

I was born without a womb so I've known for a long time I can't have children. I applied to Essex County Council when I was 26 and working for an insurance company. The process took about a year, and I had my first child, a teenager, within a few weeks of being approved. I found working full-time and fostering really hard, because you really need to be at home when they get in from school. Increasingly, foster care is considered a career; your knowledge and your involvement is critical. I was made redundant in 2009 and I've been a full-time foster carer ever since. I'm now an advanced-level carer, looking after up to three children; I'm paid slightly more. I do short-term, long-term, respite and emergency – anything from a few hours to a few years. Some come at a few minutes' notice without even a spare nappy. The 24-hour Tesco is my saviour.

I do feel a connection with them, but children are remarkably loyal to their birth families, however dire their circumstances. If not having a clean house or regular meals is all you've ever known, that's your normal. You have to be realistic about how much care they are able to absorb. I remember a friend's mum having me to stay one Christmas and making



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The facts about fostering

About 59,000 children in the UK are currently cared for by 45,000 foster families. For some it is a short stop, giving families in the grip of illness, depression or substance abuse a chance to sort out their problems. Others need a long-term stable home, or an interim home until adoptive families can be found. Currently 20 per cent of foster carers are single, 80 per cent are married and 84 per cent have their own children.

Fostering services are run either by the local authority or by independent providers. The process, from application and training to approval by a fostering panel takes about eight months, and applicants are supported by a social worker throughout. You can opt for short, long-term or emergency fostering; emergency foster carers must be prepared to receive a child who is at risk at a few hours' notice, and placements can be for as little as a few days. Once approved, you will be supported by regular visits from social workers. All foster carers receive a weekly allowance, which varies across the UK and according to the needs of the child, starting at £134.49 a week; some local authorities offer a fee on top of the allowance in recognition of skills and experience; private agencies, which often place more challenging children, tend to offer slightly more.

For more information visit fostering.net

me a stocking; it had been so long since anyone gave me anything, I hadn't a clue how to react. I found the kindness overwhelming.

I've had only a couple of placements fail. Placement under pressure is a term we use if a placement elsewhere is breaking down; you take the child for a few days to allow the situation to calm down and avoid a permanent move. I had a 14-year-old with OCD, and over the four days she was with me she completely flooded the bathroom; it required an insurance claim to repair the ceiling. But the thing she remembered about her time with me was the plaster model we made together – she had her own paint and she really enjoyed it.

Sometimes being a single foster parent works and sometimes it doesn't because children need a different set-up. Fostering has affected my social life, because if I go out, I need a babysitter, and weekends are spent in the park or taking children to swimming lessons rather than shopping or having coffee with friends. I don't always keep in touch. You're there at a critical point in their lives and you play your part. The natural flow of life is that they move on, and sometimes you have to let them go.

Jim Bond 63, has fostered 80 teenage boys over 19 years. He is single and lives in Essex

I think I'm drawn to teenagers because there's still an angry teenager inside me, wanting approval from my father. He wasn't someone who showed his feelings and I never thought I was good enough.

I headed the St John Ambulance youth section at the national HQ in London for a long time and travelled the world, but then in my 40s, with no children of my own, something triggered my need to nurture. I was the first single man who'd applied to the fostering service, and I don't think they knew what to make of me. It was a year before I was approved. I went on a 'safe caring' course, which frightened the living daylights out of me. But then I realised I'd practised safe caring throughout my career – it covers everything from dressing appropriately to not sharing your bed with a child. But you can hug them – I feel strongly about that. You should and you must.

My age group is 14-plus. Younger and they're too physically needy for me, though a child coming here at 14 is developmentally nearer 12. They always get the mum out of me. She's huggy, warm, comforting, nagging, everything my mum was. But in a couple of cases, I've felt it hasn't worked because the boys were desperate to be cared for by a traditional couple. One had been surrounded by three older brothers, all of whom abused him, and he needed to find a relationship with a female that was positive.

The moment a child is here, they are part of this family and they get absolute respect, no matter what they bring. They get peace and they get empathy; we do a lot of talking. Inevitably, after about six weeks there's a blip, which can last a fortnight or six months. Defiance, refusing to come home, destroying their rooms. It's always their stuff they damage, never mine. It's hard for them to trust adults who say, 'I'm here for you,' when everyone constantly disappears. It's my job to help them on to the next stage but also to provide a secure base. Most won't be going home. At the moment I've got Johnny, who is 16 and thinking about what he wants to do next. He'll test the water by saying, 'You don't want me

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hanging around.’ And I say, ‘This is your home. You can stay as long as you want.’

I’ve only had two unplanned endings, one when a young person threatened to kill me and it was decided that it was too risky for him to return. On another occasion I couldn’t contain the damage the boy was causing. Once in a while, fostering has come in the way of my having a close relationship of my own, and I’ve let it. I’ve gained so much from these kids, I’ve tended to put them first.

If I were to open the door to every one of the young people who’ve lived with me over the years, I wouldn’t be able to move, but some inevitably have become part of my life. One girl, who lived with another foster carer in an all-female house, used to come here at weekends because she needed a positive male role model. She’s always called me Grandad and she’s given me a ‘great-grandson’, James. You don’t go into fostering to create a family, but if you provide love and care rather than a hotel, it can happen. Bill, my third placement, is back living with me. He came to me when he was 15 – I wouldn’t say he was troubled, he just needed to be loved. He’s 32 now and he’s come and gone three times since he was 18. He has a little daughter, Abigail, who calls me Grandad, and they are adamant that’s what I am. It’s a very powerful thing for him; the word ‘foster’ is not allowed to enter the conversation.

Cheryl Walker 51, and her husband, Steve, 51, have fostered for four years. They live in Gateshead with three boys of 19, 10 and 8

From the beginning, Steve and I knew that if a child came into our family, we’d love him like our own and we wouldn’t be able to part with him. We’re in this for the long haul. The only worry we had when we decided to foster children with special needs was would we be able to cope for life? Because children aren’t suddenly off your hands once they reach 18.

I have a daughter of 31 and a son of 29 with Asperger’s syndrome, from my first marriage. For a long time, I was a single parent. I met Steve 10 years ago, when he was working as a PA to a disabled man. We both loved children and were already familiar with the world of disability, so we were drawn to fostering. The selection process was harrowing. The panel examines references and your medical history. I thought we’d be given an autistic child, but the day we were approved our supervising social worker started talking about a four-year-old who’d already been identified for us – and he was far more complex than I could ever have imagined.

We call him ‘our little whirlwind’. He has ADHD and he never stops from morning till night, and often not even then. He was two when he came into care and he’d already been through several foster carers before us – none had been able to cope. He’s up at five, and all day long it’s, ‘Mam! Mam! Mam!’ He has such an enthusiasm for the world, anything from a new cup to a tractor trundling past the house ignites feverish excitement. He’s up and down; he’s thirsty, he’s hungry, he wants a hug. Just recently, he found a power tool and dismantled his wardrobe at 4am. Bless him, he’s refreshingly honest. He’ll say, ‘I wouldn’t sit there if I was you – I’ve just broke it.’

You’re supposed to treat foster children as your own, yet in some ways you can’t. We had to get special dispensation to have him in bed with us on Sunday mornings because his main problem is



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attachment disorder; he’s never been nurtured so his need for affection is a bottomless pit. I’ve always said, ‘Give me the child and I’ll work him out.’ You throw the text book away in the end and develop your own strategies. His parents don’t want him so he’ll never go home, and we won’t adopt him because we need the support and income we get from fostering. We couldn’t hold down jobs as well because his needs are too great.

Our oldest boy is an adult placement, we’re helping him through his A-levels; the middle boy is autistic – he has his troubles, but compared with the whirlwind both are a breeze. What makes it all worthwhile is the love you get back a hundred fold. Six months in, I was diagnosed with ovarian and cervical cancer. I was fortunate that it was caught early. I had a radical hysterectomy and I’ve been clear for four years. I remember thinking, ‘I have to get better for my children.’ Whether they’re birth children or foster children, they’re all mine. And there’s no question, I love them all just the same.

Ruth Fox 48, has fostered three babies in the past four and a half years and is currently caring for a newborn full time. She and her husband, Jon, an IT services manager, have three children, Annamay, 16, Tom, 15, and Maisie, eight. They live in Sheffield

We didn’t feel our family was complete after Tom was born, but I had post-natal depression and I didn’t want to risk putting everyone through that again, so we decided to look at adoption. Maisie was 13 months old when we adopted her, and we were grateful that she’d been with a foster carer who loved her and gave her every opportunity to thrive. It seemed such a blessing, we thought, ‘Actually, we could do that for someone else.’ Our first foster child came when he was three months old and left when he was almost three. That was hard because we were new to it all and still finding our way; we suddenly

had this lovely little child living with us and we got very, very attached to him. We’re really fortunate that his adoptive family has wanted to stay in touch, but that’s not something you can guarantee. Maisie has just turned eight and still needs a lot of attention so at the moment it’s not right for us to take older children. We’ve said that we’ll take only babies under a year old – that way, she has a chance to get to know them before they start messing with her stuff. I was a teacher before I had my own children, and the age group I feel most connected to and have a good skill bank for is the under-fives.

Our latest placement came to us at six days old. He was terribly upset and sick, and after a lot of sleepless nights, we worked out he’s lactose intolerant. Most newborns come into the system because the people and activities the mum is involved with mean she is unable to care for her baby. It’s usually drugs and alcohol or a violent partner. It’s doubly sad when a mum loves her baby very much yet cannot break free from the addictions that dominate her life. Our last baby stayed a year, the one before that, two and a half. Very tiny babies are a bit of a shock to the system – you never quite know what’s coming. They can be fractious if the mum has been drinking or is drug addicted. But you can say no to a placement, and we have when we’ve felt the timing hasn’t been right – we need to fit the job around who we are as a family.

The older children are involved, and we said from the beginning if they weren’t happy, we wouldn’t carry on. My elder daughter got terribly attached to our first child, but at no point has she said, ‘I don’t want to do this any more.’ The hardest time for Maisie is when we’re getting a baby settled: we’re six weeks in with the latest and she’s playing up a bit. In between placements we make sure we do something special as a family. Last time everyone wanted to go to Alton Towers – something that would have been difficult with a baby in tow. You do think, ‘Wow, life is so much simpler without a little one.’ But as my husband points out, everything good comes at a price. It can be painful giving them up, but you love them like your own, and you do the best you possibly can for them, knowing all along they belong to someone else. ■