

Case study – Poppy Heslop

Over 50s lead the field of foster carers in Essex

Recent figures released by Essex County Council reveal that foster carers aged over 50 make up 69 per cent of the total number that are fostering through the council today.

In West Essex, 60 per cent of the County Council carers who live there are over 50; empty nesters who are using their life experience to look after vulnerable children.

Now the council is urging more people like Poppy Heslop, from Harlow, to foster. At the age of 48, she was left with a massive hole in her life following the death of husband Tony and it was only when she turned to fostering a child that she found a way to fill it.

It began three years ago, after going through a bleak period of grief, which included giving up her job as a dental nurse, Poppy started to think seriously about fostering, after a close friend who was a foster carer suggested she would be good at it.

With the support of her grown-up daughter Ria Ali-Jackson, who lives nearby, she started fostering through Essex County Council. Now she hasn't looked back and her Harlow house is home not just to her but a 12-year-old boy and a collection of pet dogs.

Poppy, now 53, would be the first to say that fostering is challenging, but she is living proof that people of any age, and those who are single, can foster successfully.

"I've found fostering such as a rewarding experience and it's really helped me move forward and find meaning in life. The support from Essex County Council has been overwhelming," she said.

Rewards happen on a daily basis, but she recalls one recently that touched her heart strings. "My foster son bought me a card, specifically with roses on it as he knows I like them, and wrote inside: 'I appreciate everything that you do'."

As her fostering role is paid, while her foster son is at school it leaves her free to help her aging parents whose health problems make them less mobile: "If I was still working full time I wouldn't have had the time to do this," she says.

Currently, around 750 children are in foster care in Essex and this number has been increasing for the past two years.

In addition, the rate of children leaving care has slowed down, bringing into sharp focus the need to recruit more foster carers for children of all ages, siblings and children with disabilities.

Cllr McKinlay, Cabinet member for Children and Families, said: "It's no surprise that such a large percentage of foster carers are over 50 as they have seen their children leave home and have the room. They have so much to offer children. We need more people like them to come forward and I would encourage anyone thinking about fostering to find out more."

Foster carers are needed on a full and part-time basis for either short or long-term placements and they can be single, married, from a same sex family or retired.

Find out about some of the children you could help, call 0800 801 530, visit www.essexadoptionandfostering.co.uk/fostering to find out the dates of information events across the county.

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Picture Caption: Poppy says: “Fostering has helped me move forward and find meaning in life.”



Notes to editors:

The percentage of carers over the age of 50 fostering through Mid, South, North and West Essex for the County Council are:

Mid Essex = 67 per cent

North Essex (combining Tendring and Colchester) = 73 per cent

South Essex = 70 per cent

West Essex = 60 per cent

- For more information about fostering and to see the range of events taking place across the county visit www.essexadoptionandfostering.co.uk/fostering or call 0800 801 530.
- Over 7,000 new foster families are needed in the next 12 months in the UK to care for a range of children.
- A high proportion of children who come into care in Essex are aged ten and over so there is also a particular need for foster carers who can provide homes for older children, as well as those who can accommodate sibling groups and children with disabilities.

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