

Volunteer Foster Handbook



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For more frequently asked questions about volunteering, follow the link [here](#). For FAQs about fostering, click [here](#).

For further information, including Safeguarding, GDPR and media guidance, please read our [OSF Volunteer Handbook](#).

Welcome to Our Special Friends

Welcome to the wonderful and rewarding world of fostering with Our Special Friends (OSF). We hope this manual helps you to prepare for fostering and guides you through the process.

Fostering is a hugely valuable service that some of our volunteers provide. This need can frequently be urgent in times of crisis, such as the owner going into hospital, being evicted, or fleeing domestic abuse. Thankfully, due to Bin's (our CEO) influence, the Dogs Trust 'Freedom Project' and Cats Protection 'Lifelines', schemes now operate in our area, to foster and reunite pets belonging to those fleeing domestic abuse, and we work collaboratively with these organisations.

People unable to care for their animals for a short time do not usually wish to give them up; they want to be reunited when they are in a better place, be that mentally, physically or financially, and this is where OSF and our wonderful volunteers come in. The client's love for their animal, and the companionship and unconditional love they receive in return, may be the only thing that has seen them through some very hard times. OSF does all it can to ensure that this bond remains intact. As a fosterer, you are enabling people experiencing vulnerability to avoid giving up their beloved pets.

Our volunteer fosterers provide a safe, secure and loving environment for these individuals' pets, which brings enormous peace of mind to their owners, enabling them to focus on their current situation. The period of fostering may be from as little as 24 hours, to as long as 12 months, and can involve additional duties such as transportation, attending veterinary appointments, and administering medication. Dogs will need to be walked and cats will (usually) need to be kept indoors, with one litter tray per cat, plus one extra.

We hope you find your role as a fosterer rewarding too! It can be difficult at times, but the team at Our Special Friends team is here to support you throughout.

Thank you for joining our fabulous fosterers.



“

“Volunteering for fostering, even for a short time, has given me an insight into the work of OSF. It provides a much-needed support network through animals and their owners; basically, I'm very impressed with what they do! I'm happy I could help in a small way, helping others is a satisfying thing for me to do.”

”

What we do

Founded in 2012, by Bin Johnston MA VetMB MRCVS, Our Special Friends (OSF) recognises the overwhelming need for, and value of, the therapeutic bond between humans and animals.

Through a range of animal companionship support services, we aim to improve wellbeing for all parties. We help those needing foster support, or practical help with their pet, such as dog walking, grooming, or in-situ care. We also recruit volunteers with friendly dogs (and very occasionally cats) to visit clients in their own homes who can no longer have their own animal for whatever reason. And we support owners facing difficult decisions and accompany them on their journey.

Your Volunteer Journey

Thank you for completing your volunteer recruitment with us. For fosterers, this included.

- A reference
- Completion of our S18 Ideal Match form
- Virtual volunteer interview (including house check)
- DBS check
- Signing our Volunteer Agreement
- Receiving your Induction Pack which includes Foster Handbook and ID badges



Matching our Fosterers

We work hard to find a suitable match for our foster animals. We consider the needs of the animal and look to match them with a fosterer who has a suitable home and lifestyle that can meet these needs.

You will have completed our S18 Ideal Match form which gives us a great idea of your availability, living environment, lifestyle, and other people and animals in the home. If at any point this information changes, please let us know as soon as you can.

If we think you might be a good match for a foster need, we will contact you directly by phone or email to discuss further. We will share appropriate information to help you decide if you are able to help. If we are unable to identify an obvious fosterer for a case, we will send out a communication to our Volunteer Community via email. We encourage you to respond to these emails if you can help.

Once agreed, we will help to arrange transportation if it is needed. For those cases where direct communication is not appropriate, we will suggest that the animal is collected from the OSF office.

 “I was hugely assisted at a very difficult time when my father was admitted to hospital in an emergency situation, enabling me to care for him, and to have the worry about his dog’s welfare taken from my shoulders.” 



Preparing for your placement

1. Animal CV

Where possible, OSF obtains a full Dog or Cat 'CV', which should detail all that is needed to provide consistent care for the animal in question. However, on occasion, this is not possible - the owner could be too unwell in hospital or may have been sectioned under the Mental Health Act and be unable to answer questions about their pet.

2. Animal History

In addition, we always try to obtain a full veterinary history and will share any relevant information from this with the fosterer. But again this is not always possible, or it may bring scant information as the animal may not have seen a vet for many months or even years.

3. Time Commitment

A discussion with the OSF Case Lead will outline the expected length of foster period, although, as previously mentioned this can be subject to change. We will also let you know the most appropriate way to communicate with the owner and OSF team.

We ask that you think ahead and check your diary. We will need to know if there are any occasions when the animal would be left alone for a significant length of time, or you are expecting visits in the early days of your foster. Please let us know if you have any holidays booked as we can help to arrange alternative care for the foster animal if needed.

4. Paperwork

We aim to complete fostering agreement paperwork at the earliest opportunity. There is one copy for the owner, and one for the fosterer. You can download and see a copy of the fosterer's agreement [here](#), and click [here](#) to see the client's agreement.


“Made my life much easier by not having to worry or stress about rehoming my beloved cats, instead I was allowed space to better my own situation so they could return to me”



The first few days: Arrival and Introduction

For more information about decompression please read our [cat](#) and [dog](#) decompression information.



 Fostering can be both rewarding and challenging, especially in the first few days as you and your foster pet get to know each other.

Here's what to expect and how to make the transition as smooth as possible:

2 Give Them Space

Allow the animal to explore their new environment at their own pace. Don't force interaction; let them come to you when they're ready.

1 Keep Things Calm

When your foster animal first arrives, keep the environment calm and quiet. Avoid overwhelming them with too much attention or new experiences.

3 Observe Behaviour

Watch for signs of stress or fear, such as hiding, trembling, excessive panting or loss of appetite. This is normal and should subside as they become more comfortable. If these behaviours continue, contact OSF for advice

The first few days: Bonding and Trust Building



Establish a Routine

Animals feel more secure when they know what to expect. Set up a consistent feeding, walking (for dogs), and playtime schedule.



Be Patient

Building trust takes time, especially if the animal has been through a difficult time with lots of change. Offer gentle reassurance and don't rush the bonding process.



Positive Reinforcement

Reward good behaviour with treats, praise, and affection. This helps reinforce positive interactions and builds a bond between you and the foster animal. Never shout or use punishment of any sort.



On occasion, an animal may have been neglected prior to coming onto our radar; whether this is because of the client's mental health issues, physical health conditions, financial status or just simply being unaware. This could mean that an animal comes into foster care in need of a groom and parasite control for example. OSF will help with this financially and practically, but we may be unaware of it until the animal is taken in by the volunteer, so we rely on observations and prompt communication from the fosterer should anything seem untoward. A good underlying knowledge of what is normal and healthy for the species you are fostering is of great importance and help here.

The first few days with a foster animal are all about patience, understanding, and creating a safe environment. Every animal will adjust at their own pace, so be flexible and open to the process.

Support from Our Special Friends

Our Special Friends is here to support you through your time as a fosterer. We will:

Cover any associated fostering costs that the owner cannot cover, including food, vet appointments and mileage

Protect your identity and act as an intermediary between Fosterer and Client if requested, or if there is any risk in relation to the case, such as with domestic abuse or addiction

Give you as much notice as we can for any changes to the expected duration of the foster period

Help provide solutions when you are unable to look after the foster animal for a period, e.g. holiday, sickness, weekends away. These solutions may be other OSF fosterers, helping to find a kennels/cattery, or locating an available professional pet sitter

Provide equipment if not provided by owner

Provide help with any behavioural issues. These may arise due to the animal being separated from their owner and placed in an unfamiliar environment, or they may be pre-existing but perhaps we were unable to gain full knowledge about the animal beforehand

Offer access to OSF volunteer training opportunities

“With the WhatsApp group, I feel that I can ask questions at any time and get sound advice and reassurance”



What we ask from you

In return we need you to:



Have some underlying knowledge of the species you are offering to foster

Have read the Cat/Dog CV (where available) in order to provide consistent care and best understand the animal you're fostering

Understand the 5 Welfare Needs of all animals

Understand signs of stress and/or pain in cats and dogs

Be understanding that the duration of the foster may need to be flexible to incorporate changes that the client may be undergoing. This may be shorter or longer (OSF will support you with this too)

Inform us of any changes that may affect your ability to foster for the expected duration e.g. holidays



Enrichment

Enrichment activities are crucial in animal fostering as they play a significant role in promoting the mental and physical wellbeing of fostered animals and help you to bond. These activities, such as puzzle toys, interactive play, and sensory stimulation, help prevent boredom, reduce stress, and encourage natural behaviours, which are essential for their development and emotional health. By providing varied and engaging experiences, enrichment fosters adaptability and resilience in animals, making them more confident and well-adjusted when transitioning to new environments. Moreover, these activities strengthen the bond between the animal and their foster caregiver, which is vital for the animal's overall sense of security and happiness.



For more information, please read our guidance on [dog](#) and [cat](#) enrichment.

Expenses

Fosterers should incur no expense when taking in and caring for foster animals, as the goal of fostering is to provide a temporary, loving environment without placing financial strain on you. OSF will cover all essential costs, including food, medical care, supplies and travel that cannot be covered by the owners. However, some owners cover foster costs, so this is decided on a case-by-case basis. But the time, love and energy all come directly from you!



When fostering an animal, if you need to buy supplies for them, please keep the receipts and send them by email or WhatsApp, along with an [Expenses Claim Form](#) (download here) to our Volunteer Support Manager, Frances Day. Sometimes the owners of the animal you're fostering arrange to buy food and have it delivered to you (if your address has been shared). OSF can also obtain some brands of cat and dog food for free, so do let us know if you're running low.

Another means we have of paying for items for animals in our foster care is by emailing you our Pets At Home voucher, which is issued to us quarterly and must be spent in store, in order for us to stay in their reward scheme.

End of a foster placement

It has recently been acknowledged that although fostering is very rewarding, there are often real feelings of grief experienced by fosterers when they hand the animal back. 92% of fosterers wonder afterwards how their foster animal is doing, and 50% mentally prepare themselves for their foster animal leaving.



Occasionally, but understandably, fosterers can feel tearful or lonely after a foster period ends and may worry about the conditions the animal is being returned to. This is where our One Welfare approach comes in - meaning human wellbeing, animal wellbeing and the environment are intrinsically linked. We address concerns about client-related issues, such as hoarding, unsanitary living conditions, addiction, loneliness and mental ill health by liaising with GPs, Social Workers, other charities, the Police and any other relevant organisations that are or should be involved.



We try and give as much notice as we can for when a reunion will happen, but on occasion, a client is unexpectedly discharged from hospital for example, and wants their animal back ASAP, so the end can sometimes feel quite abrupt. We encourage our volunteers to take comfort in the fact that they have not only looked after an animal's welfare but have also helped to protect the welfare of the client, who will have been enormously comforted to know their pet was in safe hands. We urge volunteers to contact us if they are struggling with post-foster grief, or just want to chat about any anxieties, and we share updates on the foster animal where possible.



On the rare occasion when the animal's owner is not able to take their pet back, OSF will explore all options for their pet to be rehomed.



“Without Our Special Friends I would have had to give up our beloved family cat in order to flee from domestic violence and live in refuge for 11 months. Instead, we were able to be reunited with her when we found a new place to live. My mental health improved knowing that she was being well cared for by her lovely foster carer and that I would eventually see her again. To have her back with us now is wonderful. We feel like a family again.”



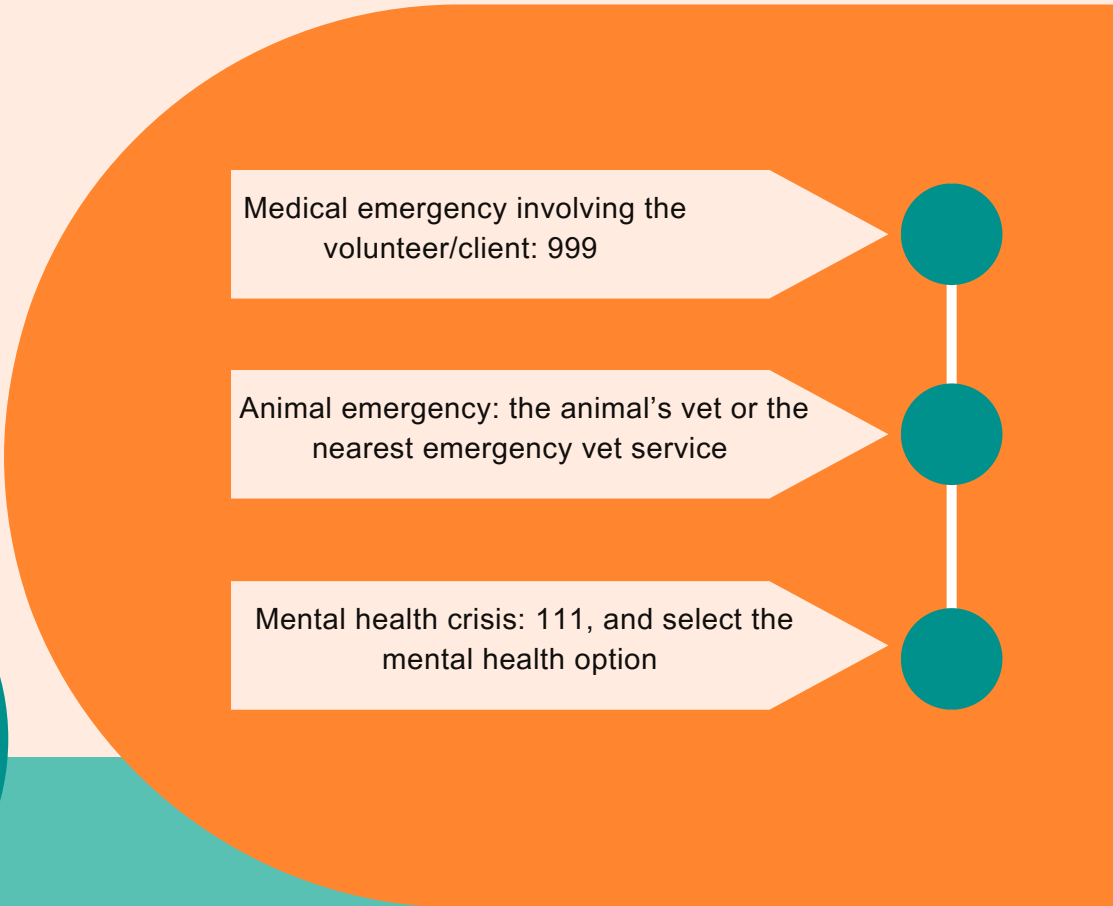
Keeping you safe

At Our Special Friends, your safety while fostering is a priority. We hope that this handbook, along with the support from our office, prepares you for your fostering experience. Please read our [Fostering Policy](#) and [Risk Assessment](#) for further information. Your wellbeing is essential to us, and we are committed to making your fostering experience safe and rewarding.

Sometimes you may be fostering an animal for someone who is in an extremely vulnerable position, for example fleeing domestic abuse. In these cases, particularly those involving dogs, as they are visibly exercised outside, we may need to ensure the animal is fostered at a separate location, and we might need to maintain anonymity, with all contact going through the office. We will always inform you if this is necessary. In cases where we don't believe there to be any risk to yourself or the animal, then direct contact can be appropriate, but we will always ask you if you are happy with this before setting up any WhatsApp groups etc.

As a small team we are unable to offer 24/7 support, but we do have several ways to keep in touch - see page 13.


In the event of an emergency, the first point of contact should be as follows:



Medical emergency involving the volunteer/client: 999

Animal emergency: the animal's vet or the nearest emergency vet service

Mental health crisis: 111, and select the mental health option



If you have any questions, or concerns, about safety please contact us.

Keeping in touch

We believe in maintaining strong communication with our volunteers to ensure a positive experience for both you and the pets in your care. Regular contact, whether through phone calls, WhatsApp, or email, help us stay connected and address any concerns you might have. We're here to offer guidance, answer questions, and provide support, ensuring you feel confident and supported throughout the fostering journey.

WhatsApp groups

We often set up WhatsApp groups to keep in touch. Where appropriate, this group includes the fosterer, members of the OSF team and the owner (or the primary contact). These groups are a great place to share photos and updates, ask questions and coordinate care. We ask that you use these groups as much as you can. As a fosterer, taking photos and videos of the animals you are fostering and sharing them with the client, either directly or through OSF, can make a world of difference to the client's time apart from their pet, and provides much joy and reassurance.



Monthly Paws

All our volunteers receive our volunteer bulletin, The Monthly Paws. This is sent at the beginning of each month and includes events, training, updates and celebrates our volunteers. We encourage you to have a read and engage with its content.

Case Discussions

We offer quarterly Case Discussion Sessions, either in person or virtually, where you can talk through any cases in detail and get tips from other volunteers and OSF staff. Of course, we encourage you to let us know if you have any concerns about a case at the time, rather than waiting for these discussion sessions. But they are useful to hash things out and are interesting learning experiences for us all too.



Contact Details



01284 335351



Our Special Friends,
c/o British Racing
School, Snailwell
Road, Newmarket,
CB8 7NU



office@ourspecialfriends.org

Our office is open 8:30 – 16:30 should you wish to give us a call or arrange to pop in and see us.

For case-related/service delivery queries please contact:

Gemma Reid

Animal Companionship Practitioner (ACP)
gemma.reid@ourspecialfriends.org

Bin Johnston

Chief Executive/ACP
bin.johnston@ourspecialfriends.org

Chloe Smith

Animal Companionship Coordinator (ACC)
chloe.smith@ourspecialfriends.org

For any questions regarding pastoral care and your volunteer journey please contact:

Frances Day

Volunteer Support Manager (VSM)
frances.day@ourspecialfriends.org