

**HAVE you ever thought about being a foster carer but were worried you weren't suitable? Former soldier and single dad Martin Betts, 51, doesn't fit the usual stereotype of a foster carer but he wants his experience to help other people come forward:**

"If anyone had said to me a few years ago that I would be a foster dad living on my own in a council house in Hillsborough I would have thought they were crackers.

"But that's exactly what I am doing and I absolutely love it. I used to be in the army - serving for seven years in the Royal Ordnance Corps – before I took a job as a builder. Once my son – my only child – grew up I realised I wanted to look after more children.

"I have three sisters and one brother so as you can imagine our council house when I was growing up was always a busy place. And since then two of my sisters have taken on foster children and I have seen first-hand how much they contributed to the lives of children and enjoyed it.

"I was a single dad at the time and thought 'if I can bring my own child up, I'm sure I can help other children as well'."

It was because of this that I wondered whether I might be considered suitable to do this.

"However, I wasn't holding my breath – being a single dad living in a two bedroom council house I just didn't think I stood a chance.

"Like a lot of people I didn't even think you were allowed to be a foster carer as a single man. So I was very surprised when I rang the fostering team at Sheffield City Council and they said I would be ideal! I couldn't believe it. But they assured me they wanted foster carers to be from all sorts of backgrounds in order to give the children they placed as normal an existence as possible. In fact they said there was a shortage of men coming forward to be foster carers.

"I was also concerned that my home wasn't big enough or posh enough, but I was soon reassured this wasn't relevant at all. All you need to have is a spare room and once you have been properly checked as being suitable, you can become a foster parent.

"Within six months of making that initial enquiry with the council I became a foster dad for the first time. And since then I have fostered more than 15 children, some for longer periods of time than others.

"And now I am the proud foster dad of two brothers who are with me long term now on a permanent fostering basis.

"I would urge anybody who is thinking about fostering to make that initial call to the council. They will come round and talk to you about it and if it's not for you then there is no hard sell. There is often quite a stigma attached to foster kids but I would like to dispel this myth – they really aren't as bad as people think they are. These are just young children who need some love, care and stability in their lives to help them grow and flourish. Seeing the difference you can make to a young person's life has been the most rewarding experience of my life.

"I know some people may also be worried about having a spare room and the Bedroom Tax issues with this, but please talk to the council as they helped me with this. Don't let this put you off fostering. Ring the council today."

Sheffield City Council is wanting to recruit more foster carers, and is particularly keen to hear from people who can care for older children or who can keep brothers and sisters together, as well as people, like Martin who can offer permanent homes to children.