

Foster Carer's Fees and Allowances

Lead Officer: Becky Hopkins – Strategic Manager Child Placements and Resources

Author: Becky Hopkins

Contact Details: 01823 357839

Cabinet Member: Frances Nicholson

Division and Local Member: All

1. Summary

- 1.1 The introduction of a Progression Scheme as part of Somerset's offer to foster carers was approved by Cabinet in June 2014. The aim of the scheme was to ensure that children are cared for by people with the right skills and experience and that foster carers are recognised for the skills and experience they bring to the role (refer to attached Foster Carer's Progression Scheme). At this time Somerset was one of the few local authorities who did not have such a scheme and therefore this enabled the service to align and put itself in a more competitive position regarding the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

The introduction of the scheme was seen as a very positive move forward and performance in relation to the recruitment of foster carers in 2014/15 and 2015/16 showed a significant improvement compared to previous years. However 2016/17 saw the lowest number of new approvals over a five year period and an overall net loss of foster carers. Analysis of why foster carers have left the service does not suggest that this is for negative reasons. The reasons for deregistration are various and for a number of carers this is because permanence has been secured for the children placed with them. The other main reason is because the population of foster carers in Somerset is ageing and therefore the other main reasons for deregistration are retirement, ill health or family commitments.

Foster carers report that the needs of the children they care for are increasingly complex. Alongside this, and rightly so, the aspirations for children in care and the expectations about the services available to them have increased. Foster carers are a key vehicle to support change as they provide 24/7 care and contribute to assessment, planning and the provision of stability and security for children. Foster carers need to understand, adapt to and meet the often complex needs of children in care.

In view of the information above a review of the support offer available to foster carers has been undertaken over the last 3 months.

The aim of the review was to develop the current offer to support the following:

- Improved recruitment performance resulting in an increase in the number of in house foster carers;
- An increase in the choice and range of high quality placements offering permanency;
- Improved matching of carers abilities and skills with children's assessed needs;
- Increased fairness and consistency across all support elements;
- A fostering offer which is transparent and easy to understand.

This review links directly with Programme 6 of the Children and Young People's Plan 2016-19 – Achieving Permanence for Children in Care and Care Leavers and the Sufficiency Statement Action Plan 2017/18. The shortage of foster carers both nationally and locally is well recognised and the need to increase numbers of foster carers able to meet the needs of Somerset children is a priority and is a corporate responsibility (refer to attached Fostering Recruitment Update to Scrutiny June 2017 for details of recruitment activity and performance).

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1.** The Committee is being asked to consider and comment on these proposed changes before the Cabinet meeting on 16 August 2017 when they will be recommended for approval. The changes have the aim of re-aligning and ensuring that Somerset's offer to foster carers is competitive and attractive and taking into account feedback from foster carers, achieves greater equity, simplicity and transparency.

The cost of this proposal is calculated to be £226,200 per annum. This calculation is based on the number of current carers, the payment level they were on during the first 2 weeks of July 2017 and the number of children in each placement.

The cost of the proposal is significant, however this would relate to the cost difference between 11 children placed internally rather externally or the avoidance of 1 child being placed in residential provision for 1 year. There is no annual increase proposed to fostering allowances in 2017/18.

In addition to the changes detailed in the revised progression scheme document, the service is also working with HR to review and reignite the Fostering Friendly Employer Policy and to include foster carers in the My Staff Shop Offer. The foster carers training programme has also been reviewed and revised.

3. Background

- 3.1.** As reported to Scrutiny Committee in June 2017, there is a shortage of foster care placements both nationally and locally and this is set against an increase in the number of children in care. Whilst the number of children in care in Somerset has remained static over the last 12-18 months, overall there has been a significant increase in the last 5 years.

As noted in Section 1, recruitment performance in recent years has compared favourably to the performance of other local authorities in the South West, however, 2016/17 saw the lowest number of new approvals over a five year period and an overall net loss of foster carers

Whilst recruitment is challenging, recent comparative analysis suggests that the fostering market is not saturated and that there are still families in Somerset who can be targeted to foster. Recruitment activity targeted at specific areas of the county where numbers of approved foster carers as a % of the population are low is on-going.

The Progression Scheme was due for review given that it is 3 years since implementation. The plan to review was supported by the Placements Review which took place in November 2016. The Placements Review undertook a comparison exercise on the offer to foster carers made by other local authorities. Whilst a direct comparison is not possible due to the wide variety of structural and payment arrangements, this has been revisited as part of this review to ensure a realistic yet competitive offer is proposed.

The existing scheme is attached for reference and for comparison with the proposed revised version which is also attached. The significant changes/points are:

- The annual cost of implementation will be £226, 200.
- The progression levels are reduced from 4 to 3 and the Home Based Care Scheme is merged with the Mainstream Plus level.
- Requirements for each level have been revised to ensure child focus and clarity of expectations.
- Alignment of benefits for all foster carers such as holiday and respite entitlement and sickness payments.
- The introduction of a uniform allowance at significant transition points.
- Flexible arrangements for holiday payments to enable foster carers to book holidays for children in advance.
- The removal of the emergency fostering scheme and the inclusion of this as an expectation for Mainstream Plus foster carers who have a vacancy.

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** All foster carers were invited to join a consultation.

Consultation meetings were held with a group of 10-15 foster carers from across the different fostering schemes on 24th April 2017 and 28th June 2017. A meeting was held with Home Based Carers on 11th May 2017.

5. Implications

5.1. The implications of not having a support offer which is competitive and meets the needs of Somerset foster carers are:

- The needs of children in Somerset cannot be adequately met locally. Without enough foster carers locally there is an increased risk that children will need to be placed further away from their families, schools and local communities. There is also an increased risk that children may be placed in residential provision where this is not their assessed need.
- Opportunities to recruit new foster carers in what is a challenging climate cannot be maximised. Changes in the economic climate and culture means that it is more difficult for families with the skills and experience required for fostering to consider this. Economic necessity may mean all adults in a family need an income; adult children remain at home longer; families may have less physical space.
- People considering fostering may make a decision to foster for a neighbouring local authority or for an independent agency.
- Foster carers do not feel valued as part of the professional team around the child and do not have an opportunity to progress and develop. As result of this foster carers may experience low morale, become disenchanted with the service and may decide to leave the service.

6. Background papers

Proposed revised Foster Carer's Progression Scheme June 2017

Fostering Recruitment Update to Scrutiny June 2017