

Report to the Cabinet

Meeting to be held on Thursday, 3 December 2020

Report of the Head of Fostering, Adoption, Residential and Youth Offending Services

Part I

Electoral Division affected:
(All Divisions);

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

Contact for further information:

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Executive Summary

Nationally there is a shortage of foster carers. The more foster carers Lancashire is able to recruit and retain, the more able we are to place Lancashire children with Lancashire foster carers. This not only results in a financial saving, but also allows our most vulnerable children to be cared for by foster carers assessed and supported by Lancashire County Council. This report sets out a strategy to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers in Lancashire County Council including:

- (i) Support to Lancashire foster carers who are also employees of Lancashire County Council Fostering Wellbeing Activity Programme;
- (ii) Retainer fees;
- (iii) Word of mouth referrals;
- (iv) Welcome recommendation for new applicants.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to approve the recommendations set out in the report for a strategy to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers in Lancashire.

Background and Advice

Every week we have children that need placing in foster care. There is a real and urgent need for Lancashire to continue recruiting and retaining our own foster carers. Lancashire County Council's fostering service has reviewed the support available to foster carers, and what impact this has on the retention of our foster carers. By increasing support and initial incentives, this increases the opportunity to recruit and retain more foster carers. Lancashire has looked at different local authorities to

consider what recruitment and retention schemes they offer and how we can learn from this. Following on from this, we have recently developed, and are now in the process, of launching three new initiatives to support the recruitment and retention of our foster carers.

The first initiative is a Foster Care Academy which supports the learning and development of foster carers during the initial approval stage. Secondly, we developed a Mentoring Scheme which supports newly approved foster carers to be mentored by an experienced foster carer. Thirdly, we developed the Fostering Communities project, which allows an experienced foster carer to offer advice, guidance and support to four fostering families, to minimise isolation and develop a support network. There is a national shortage of foster carers and we continuously need to develop and enhance the way we attract new foster carers.

(i) Support to Lancashire foster carers who are also employees of Lancashire County Council

It is proposed that the county council introduces a scheme that is based upon the Fostering Network "Fostering Friendly" programme. The "Fostering Friendly" programme helps its member organisations to support their employees who foster. The Fostering Network have reported that nearly 40% of foster carers combine fostering with other work, and that having a supportive employer who allows them to balance work with caring for a child can make a significant difference to an employee. A simpler format for Lancashire has initially been suggested, based on the Fostering Network initiative, which would enable county council staff to foster and continue with their own employment. This is a good opportunity for Lancashire to support its own employees who, in turn, support our valuable children in care.

The basic premise is to allow employees of Lancashire County Council to have five days special leave that will allow them to undertake training and meetings specific to the fostering role or for the care of the child.

Lancashire County Council already offers additional paid leave for the following extraneous duties:

- Three weeks for parliamentary elections.
- Two weeks for reservists attending summer camp.
- Election duty.
- Employees who are appointed to serve on School Governing Bodies.

Recommendations for support to Lancashire County Council's foster carers who are also employees of Lancashire County Council:

Lancashire County Council to adopt the policy of five days special leave (or 37 hours) paid leave, per year for staff undertaking training or meetings related to their role as a Lancashire foster carer (including applicant foster carers).

The policy to be incorporated into the County Council's Human Resources guidance.

To explore which other benefits could be offered and applied.

To engage with partners to encourage businesses in Lancashire to adopt similar support arrangements for their employees.

Fostering Wellbeing Activity Programme

The Wellbeing Activity Programme will allow fostering families to access activities in the community at a complimentary or reduced rate.

The basic premise is for Lancashire's local businesses to work collaboratively with the Fostering Service, to identify and develop wellbeing opportunities, activities and events for our foster carers, children and fostering families. This will include activities related to art, culture, sport, and self-care. This initiative is intended to offer the following benefits:

- Building a network of support.
- Enhanced retention.
- Support more family friendly activities to help nurture and build positive relationships.
- Allow foster carers some self-care opportunities.
- Increase children's self-confidence, aspirations and create positive memorable experiences.

It is hoped that the programme would include free access to leisure centres, gyms, theatres, cinemas, zoos, football matches, indoor play and activity centres, extracurricular clubs, weekend holidays, spa days and the sponsoring of the summer and winter parties and the awards evening. The expectation is that local businesses will recognise and support our collective corporate parenting responsibility.

The organisation and administration of the Fostering Wellbeing Activity programme will be contained within the fostering service.

Recommendation for the Fostering Wellbeing Activity Programme:

Lancashire County Council, at a corporate level, to support the Fostering Wellbeing Activity Programme. This will enable further discussions with local businesses, borough councils and local enterprises to offer free or discounted activities/goods for our children and fostering families.

(ii) Retainer fees

Fostering applicants will often apply to become foster carers with the intention of giving up their current employment to become full time foster carers. Due to the number of children in care there is always a high likelihood that, if they are suitable, a foster carer will be matched to children. Should an allegation be made against a foster carer, the foster child/children would be removed from the home whilst an investigation takes place. The investigation period varies from case to case and, at times, continues for an extended time period. During this time, the child or children would continue to reside elsewhere until the investigation had been concluded. Following the investigation, if the county council can be satisfied that no risk has been identified that would prevent the foster carer from caring for our children, then

the foster carer would be able to resume their foster carer responsibilities. However, during the investigation period, the foster carer would receive no income from fostering, which could lead to significant financial pressure.

Where a child or children had been removed from a foster family due to an allegation, a sliding scale of payment of the skill fee element of the allowance would enable the foster carer to make alternative arrangements or to seek temporary employment until the investigation is concluded. After three months, there would be no further payment made to the foster carer, with the expectation that the foster carer would make alternative arrangements, pending the conclusion of the investigation.

Recommendation for retainer sliding scale:

Lancashire County Council to pay a retainer to approved foster carers who have had children removed from their care, due to an allegation that has not yet been substantiated. The payment made during this period would relate to the skill fee only and would be paid on the following basis:

- 100% during the first month.
- 60% during the second month.
- 40% during the third month.

(iii) Word of mouth referral

Another way to increase the foster carer cohort is through word of mouth. Lancashire County Council currently pays £250 to any Lancashire approved foster carer, who encourages family member(s) or friend(s) to apply to foster with Lancashire, resulting in an approval. Increasing the amount of this payment would make this a much more attractive offer and we are aware that some other local authorities and independent fostering agencies have implemented similar strategies. Although these strategies seem to be successful, there is no significant evidence base to indicate the level of success. A trial period for a similar scheme in Lancashire is therefore proposed. In addition, it is proposed that the fee would be payable to both approved foster carers and Lancashire County Council employees making the successful referrals.

Recommendation for word of mouth referrals:

It is suggested that the amount is increased from £250 to £1,500, to make it more attractive to the current foster carers and to introduce it for employees.

It is further suggested that this proposal is trialled for 12 months, at which point it will be reviewed and, if successful, permanently implemented.

(iv) Welcome

Applicants interested in becoming a foster carer often make enquiries with many fostering agencies before selecting who they want to foster with. In order to attract

more foster carers, a 'golden hello' welcome could be a further incentive to attract applicants to apply to Lancashire County Council.

Welcome recommendation:

It is proposed that £1,000 is offered to any new applicants applying to Lancashire County Council if the application results in approval. This is likely to also attract experienced foster carers. It is proposed that the incentive fee will be paid two months after the new fostering family has been caring for a child in care.

It is further suggested that this proposal is trialled for 12 months, at which point it would be reviewed and, if successful, permanently implemented.

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk management

No significant risk management implications have been identified; the direct cost of the proposals outlined in this report will be met from within the Fostering Service Budget, as set out below.

Financial

Foster care services support the council to meet its statutory Sufficiency Duty, under which it must ensure that there are a range of placements sufficient to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. Under its Duty, the council seeks to improve the quality and choice of placements, ensure value for money and minimise the likelihood of suitable placements not being available locally. As at 30th September 2020, 1,051 (50%) of our looked after children were accommodated with non-connected foster carers.

Two key objectives of the Fostering Service are to recruit and retain foster carers in Lancashire, to keep children closer to home, and to provide more cost effective care than independent fostering agencies and children's homes. Whilst independent fostering agencies can provide essential and value-for-money services, placements are on average c£390/week per child more expensive than in-house provision.

The proposals set out in this report seek to address recruitment, retention and wider budget pressures by enhancing the service offer to foster carers.

Not all elements of the proposal have a direct budget implication.

(a) The support to Lancashire County Council's foster carers who are also employees of Lancashire County Council's initiative, in most instances, is not

expected to have a direct cost as a staff member would be entitled to additional leave rather than additional pay. However, there may be a cost if a particular service must backfill a member of staff, so that service delivery is not affected when the individual takes their special leave entitlement. The impact of this policy change is expected to be minimal but will be subject to regular monitoring.

(b) The Fostering Wellbeing Activity Programme will initially need staff resource to build a network of local businesses who are willing to support the Programme. The Programme will only be successful through collaborative working and, because activities and events will be provided on an on-going basis throughout the year, there will be a commitment required from the Fostering Service to regularly communicate with businesses and foster carers. The additional commitment will be managed by the Fostering Service within its existing resources.

(c) The additional cost of increasing the word of mouth referral incentive by £1,250 on a permanent basis, and the proposal to offer £1,000 welcome payments for new carers for a 6-month period - both of which will become payable after two months' of placement - will be mitigated by the lower fee from placing in-house, rather than with an independent fostering agency. No additional pressure on the existing budget provision is anticipated from these proposals.

The proposal to continue to pay the skill fee element of the fostering allowance, to a foster carer who is subject to an allegation for up to the first three months during which an investigation is underway, has a direct budget implication. Payment will be on a reducing scale: 100% in the first month, 60% in the second month and 40% in the third month, after which time payment will cease entirely. During the 12 months to August 2020, thirteen foster carers were placed on hold for this reason, for periods varying from one week to over six months. Applying the proposed sliding payment scale, payments totalling £20,490 would have been made over the 12 months. The potential fee payments during any given financial year will vary depending on the number and duration of investigations underway. In the context of the overall in-house fostering budget (2020-21: £18.1m) the 12-month evidenced figure of £20,490 is considered to be a small amount in comparison to the funding envelope, therefore the Fostering Service will endeavour to manage retainer fees within the existing budget provision, but will monitor and report the impact through the regular budget monitoring process.

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
None		
Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate		
N/A		