

Report to the Cabinet

Meeting to be held on Thursday, 7 July 2022

Report of the Head of Service Fostering, Adoption Lancashire & Blackpool and Residential Services

Part I

Electoral Division affected:
(All Divisions);

Corporate Priorities:
Delivering better services;

Allowances to Fostering and Adoption Panel Chairs and Members

(Appendix 'A' refers)

Contact for further information:

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Brief Summary

The report proposes an increase in the fees paid for Fostering and Adoption Panel membership. The proposals put forward are informed by analysis of the financial arrangements that exist in comparative Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies.

The Fostering Panel is an independent body that fulfils the county council's statutory function in making recommendations to an Agency Decision Maker, in respect of the approval of foster carers in Lancashire. The Adoption Panel fulfils a parallel function in respect of the approval of adoptive parents, and the matching of children who require an adoptive family.

The proposed changes will provide increased fees for independent members of the Fostering and Adoption Panel central list, that is comparable to the allowances and fees received by panel members and chairs for other local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies.

The overriding aim of the proposal is to support the recruitment and retention of a suitably skilled, experienced, and diverse panel pool, that is able to provide high quality decision making that reflects the county council's commitment to children in care and those requiring adoptive families. This report also updates members on the interim arrangements for ensuring no financial detriment in the first year of young people 'Staying Put' with their foster carers.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to:

- (i) Approve the payment increase for Fostering and Adoption Panel members and chairs as follows:
 - a. To increase the payments for chairs from £450 to £500 per meeting
 - b. To increase the payments for members from £90 to £120 per meeting
- (ii) Endorse the approach set out in the report to "Staying Put" payments to ensure no financial detriment in the first year.

Detail

Fostering and Adoption Panels have a crucial role to play in the provision and monitoring of foster care and adoption of children. The Fostering and Adoption Panels make timely, quality, and appropriate recommendations/decisions, in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in the care of the county council throughout their lives.

Making decisions about approval of foster carers and adopters, and assessing the continued ability of carers to meet the complex needs of children and the matching of children to adoptive families, are critical tasks.

Fostering and Adoption Panels are intended as multi-disciplinary bodies with a considerable element of independence from fostering and adoption services. Panels play an important quality assurance role, providing objectivity and have the ability to challenge practice. They are also required to give regular feedback to services.

Panels should have members with experience of fostering or adoption, education, family and friends care, and should be gender balanced and reflect the diversity of the local communities. The education and health of children in the county council's care features in panel discussions, and panels benefit from the contribution of people with expertise in different areas, including expertise by direct experience.

Lancashire County Council currently has 40 members on the central Fostering and Adoption Panel list, and it is recognised that there is competition with not only neighbouring authorities, but also nationally, to recruit members, as many panels are currently held virtually, or with hybrid attendance.

Recruiting and retaining members from a wide range of people is key to having a diverse set of people on the Fostering and Adoption Panel's memberships, and for the panels to run effectively and efficiently. It is vital that the panels reflect and understand the community, and that foster carers and adopters from all backgrounds have confidence in panel representation. Lancashire panel membership for both the Fostering and Adoption Panels has under-representation from some parts of the community, and to launch a recruitment campaign and retain existing members, the county council needs to be able to compete in the job market by offering a fair and competitive fee for panel members' services.

The current payment fees for Fostering and Adoption Panel members and chairs are not in line with the average for other fostering providers in England. Comparisons to other local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies are set out at Appendix 'A'.

Regulation 23 (6) of the Fostering Network Survey December 2021 states that panel members are paid a fee of a reasonable amount as the service provider determines. Guidance 5.18 adds that fees should take account of preparation time.

Fostering and Adoption Panel members are required to read all of the submitted paperwork for each item and prepare before their attendance at the panel meeting. Panels run from 9am - 4.30pm; taking the preparation and attendance into account, this equates to 2 days work for the payment fee.

The proposed changes are recommended to ensure Lancashire County Council recognises and values the current panel members and chairs, by offering a competitive payment fee that reflects both the amount of reading and preparation required prior to panels, and their contribution at panel meetings.

The increased fees will allow the county council to retain existing panel members and support the recruitment of greater diversity to panel membership. The plan is to advertise for additional panel members and one additional chair, to create more flexibility for panel dates, and ensure the panels are quorate and reflect the community they serve. There is also a focus to recruit internal social workers to attend the panels for their own learning and professional development, and to increase panel membership, which will have no financial cost.

The current payment fees and proposal are as follows:

Type of panel and current arrangements	Current costs	Proposed costs
ADOPTION 3 panels per month 36 panels per year 1 Chair / 4 panel members to be quorate (Medical advisor not included)	Chair £450 Member £90 Total £810 per panel Total £29,160 per year	Chair £500 Member £120 Total £980 per panel Total £35,280 per year Additional £6120 per year
FOSTERING 4 panels per month 48 planned panels per year 6 additional/ emergency panels held per year 1 Chair / 4 panel members to be quorate	Chair £450 Member £90 £810 per panel £38,880 per year £4860 per year Total £43,740 per year	Chair £500 Member £120 £980 per panel £47,040 per year £5880 per year Total £52,920 per year Additional £9,180 per year

It should be noted that Adoption Panel members will receive £90 per panel for half day meetings. Vice Chairs will receive £300 per panel when they Chair the Panel in the absence of the Chair. These amounts are unchanged.

'Staying Put' Arrangements

At the meeting on 3 March 2022, Cabinet approved proposals to invest in enhanced allowances to our Lancashire Foster Carers. The Cabinet report acknowledged the need to come back with proposals in respect of Staying Put allowances, to ensure the county council continues to support these arrangements. 'Staying Put' is where young people who are of an age to leave care, wish to stay with their existing foster carers. That review is ongoing, and, in the interim, Cabinet is asked to endorse the approach being taken by officers under the Scheme of Delegation to uphold the principle of no financial detriment in the first year of Staying Put.

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Financial

These proposals will cost a maximum additional £15,300 per year, on top of existing expenditure if all additional fostering panels are utilised. It is proposed that this cost will be met from within the existing resource allocation.

Risk management

Should the proposal not be agreed, this would result in reduced panel membership if the county council is unable to recruit and retain panel members creating a negative impact of the key functions of Fostering and Adoption Panels.

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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None

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A