

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: Thursday 24 November 2022

SUBJECT: Foster Carer Financial Support

REPORT FROM: Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

CONTACT OFFICER: Jeanette Richards, Executive Director of Children's Services

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 At Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on the 22 September 2022, Children's Services were asked to provide an update on the financial support being offered to foster carers now and also in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.
- 1.2 This report provides an update on action taken to consider the financial support being offered to foster carers now and in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.
- 1.3 The report also provides an update on the progress of a review of Bury's current fostering, fees, allowances, and incentives and how we compare to other Greater Manchester local authorities.

2.0 ISSUES

Local context

- 2.1 The Council currently have 361 children in our care. We are facing significant demand pressures upon placements and the availability of foster care placements within the Borough. As a result, too many children are being placed in Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA). The use of IFA placements is costly and places increasing demand on the agency budget. In addition, for a small number of children who have more complex needs, often due to the trauma they have experienced, we are unable to identify foster placements for them and residential placements are needed.
- 2.2 Foster carer conversion from application to approval has been significantly impacted during the two years of Covid. When we look at trends via the Greater Manchester dashboard (a tool utilised for sharing data across the authorities) it is clear that the patterns in enquiries and approvals from the start of the Covid pandemic have reduced. We have a clear need to increase the number of Bury approved foster carers to increase the availability of placements within the Borough, primarily to meet the needs of our children in care and care leavers and to utilise more cost-effective placements, rather than external high-cost placements. A key objective to improve placement sufficiency in the Borough is to increase the number of Bury approved foster carers available.

- 2.3 As at the end of October 2022 we had a total of 105 Bury approved foster carers. This figure included 60 mainstream fostering households and 45 Friends and Family connected households. We have 155 children in these placements, 79 children living with Bury Foster carer households and 76 children with our Friends and Family approved households.
- 2.4 In July 2022, Cabinet approved a proposed restructure of Children's Services subject to consultation. These proposals that we are now moving to implement include a restructure of the Fostering service to ensure managers have a clear line of sight on practice, increased capacity with smaller spans of responsibility. For Fostering this will see the introduction of a Head of Home role that will oversee fostering and adoption services, introduction of three fostering teams who will have a specific focus on training and recruitment, supporting foster carers and assessment and support to family and friend and SGO carers. This restructure will enable us to strengthen our offer to foster carers, our recruitment activity and support us to consider specialist fostering models.
- 2.5 Bury foster carers are committed to our children and young people and provide good quality care to them. We need to retain skilled and experienced carers and to recruit new carers. In 2023/2024 there is a priority to increase the number of Bury approved fostering households by at least 20.
- 2.6 Bury is one of eight Greater Manchester authorities who are exploring the possibility of the development of a Greater Manchester Enquiry Hub aimed at supporting foster carer recruitment.

National Context

- 2.7 There is an ongoing national crisis in terms of foster carer recruitment and retention and overall placement sufficiency and choice for children needing to place within foster families. The covid pandemic and subsequent lockdowns had a significant impact upon carer recruitment for all Local Authorities' and Independent Fostering Agencies.
- 2.8 Concerns of Foster Carers are highlighted in the 'Cost of Living Report' that was published this year by Fostering Network (a link to this report can be found in background documents below). A survey of foster carers conducted by FosterWiki has highlighted the serious financial pressures on the sector as the cost-of-living crisis continues to mount. This report echoes the findings of the State of the Nation 2021 survey of over 3,000 foster carers, which showed that for over a third of foster carers their allowances do not meet the full cost of looking after a child. (A link to this report can be found in background documents below). The report concluded if foster carers are to continue to provide stable, loving homes for children and young people, they must be well funded to do so and there are calls to have minimum allowances for foster carers.

Corporate Parenting Duty

- 2.9 As Corporate Parents we need to ensure wherever possible and safe to do so children looked after can continue to live in Bury as their hometown and stay connected to their family and friend network and their communities. When children cannot remain in the care of their own families we need to ensure that we have sufficient Foster placements to meet their needs.

Voice of Foster Carers

- 2.10 Bury Foster Carers have an active Foster Care Association who provide a representative voice and link directly to the service, they have sought the views of carers and are a representative voice for the wider carer group. The Foster Care Association have voiced concerns regarding two significant issues. Firstly, the cost-of-living crisis and carer fees, secondly the council spend on Independent Fostering Agency placements for children in care. Our Carers, like other families are experiencing challenges linked to the cost-of-living crisis. There is a strong and compelling view that the local authority should put greater investment into the Bury Fostering service and financial support to Bury carers needs to

support them to continue to foster and to provide good quality care to our children. This will also assist with the recruitment of new carers and to retain existing carers who are supporting Bury children in care.

- 2.11 At the Corporate Parenting Board held on 25.10.22 foster carer representatives were clear they want to continue to care for our children but highlighted the needed the right level of financial support to do so. Foster carers have highlighted the impact the cost-of-living crisis is having on families caring for our children and young people and they are concerned that this may result in some carers not being able to continue to foster. This was reiterated on the 15.11.22 when the Executive Director of Children and Young People’s Services and the Lead Member for Children and Young People attended the Foster Carers Forum. At the forum foster carers told them that many fostering households were struggling financially and that current fees were not adequate. Foster carers reported feeling heard but frustrated by the time it is taking to address this.

3.0 ACTION TAKEN

- 3.1 Foster carers currently receive weekly fees for their professional role and a maintenance allowance that supports them to care each child and young person, and in addition they receive Birthdays, Christmas, and holiday allowances. Please see below the current weekly professional fees and allowances offered to Bury foster carers:

Current weekly Professional Fee for each child placed:

0-10 years old is £130
11-17 years old is £140

Current weekly maintenance allowance for each child placed:

0 - 4-year-old is £141
5 -10-year-old is £156
11- 15-year-old is £177
16 - year-old is £207.

- 3.2 We are preparing a report for Cabinet that provides a range of information regarding Fostering fees and allowances and how our offer to foster carers compares to other Greater Manchester authorities. Bury are not the lowest paying local authority but we are not competitive when compared to higher paying neighbouring authorities in particular for older children and young people and this is likely to impacts on our ability to recruit and retain foster carers. The table below provides an example of how our allowances compared to other Greater Manchester local authorities in September 202, in relation to two age groups.

Child’s Age	10-year-old	14-year-old
Bury	£286	£317
Highest GM Authority	£311	£419
Lowest GM Authority	£149	£177
GM Ranking	4th	5th

- 3.3 Greater Manchester Fostering Leads meet monthly and work closely with Placements Northwest and the Greater Manchester Combined Authorities. Scoping exercises have been carried out by Greater Manchester Combined Authorities with a view to developing additional workstreams to support recruitment of Foster carers amongst all ten Greater Manchester authorities. This ‘scoping’ has generated a great deal of discussion about the offer each local authority provides to carers.
- 3.4 The report to Cabinet will also make recommendations about how we can develop and improve the range of incentives to strengthen our current offer to foster carers.

- 3.5 We have made a request for a one-off grant for foster carers from the Household Support Fund to support foster carers with the rising costs of living which is being considered and we hope to have feedback on in the next weeks. We are aware other Greater Manchester local authorities plan to offer a one-off grant or have done so already.
- 3.6 This year we have offered an uplift to fostering fees and allowances. Fees were uplifted 2.3% this year, backdated to the start of this financial year. Whilst the uplift was welcomed Foster Carers have told us this uplift did not go far enough and has had little or no impact on the challenges they face with the cost-of-living crisis..
- 3.7 In August 2022 the Foster Carer Forum raised concerns about the rise in fuel costs and queried why it was that mileage could only be claimed after the first 10 miles when these costs are directly attributable to caring for foster children. We recognise foster carers will routinely use their cars to support our children and young people to attend school, out of school activities and contact with their families. In response to the increased fuel costs, we increased the mileage allowance for foster cares from 40.4p to 45p per mile in line with the approved HMRC rate and the recommended mileage and the allowance we have paid to staff. In addition, it was agreed that foster carers should be paid the first ten miles at the full mileage rate was backdated for mileage claims from 01 April 2022

4.0 CONCLUSION

The department are mindful of the impact the cost-of-living crisis is having on families including foster carers who are caring for our children. We are carefully considering how we can strengthen our support to foster carers and will be able to provide a further update following our report to Cabinet.

List of Background Papers/Information:-

Foster Talk Cost of Living Report 2022 [FosterTalk-Cost-of-Living-Report-2022.pdf](#)

State of the Nation Foster Care 2021, [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 | The Fostering Network](#)

Contact Details:-

Linda Evans (Interim Assistant Director for Social Care Improvement)

Executive Director sign off Date: _____

JET Meeting Date: _____