

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 7th March 2023

SUBJECT: Foster Carer Revised Offer

REPORT FROM: Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

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

1. 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. As already acknowledged, there remains an ongoing national crisis in terms of Foster Carer recruitment and retention and placement sufficiency for children and young people needing to be placed within Foster families. The covid pandemic and subsequent lockdowns had a significant impact upon Foster Carer recruitment for all Local Authorities' and Independent Fostering Agencies. The Council has experienced an increase in the number of children coming into care.
- 1.2. Due to an increase in our CLA cohort, we have significant demand pressures upon placements and the availability of Foster care placements within the Borough. As a result, too many children are being placed outside the Borough in Independent Foster Agency or residential placements, which are costly and increase spend against the agency budget. When we look at trends via the Greater Manchester dashboard (a tool for sharing data across the authorities) we can see patterns of decline in enquiries and approvals from the start of the Covid pandemic. We have a clear need now to repair that impact and significantly increase the number of Bury approved Foster Carers and Supported Lodging Hosts to increase the availability of homes within the Borough, primarily to meet the needs of our children in care and care leavers, but also to use more cost-effective placements, rather than external high cost 'specialist' placements.
- 1.3. As a good corporate parent to looked after children we need to ensure that 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 wider community. When children cannot remain in the care of their own families, we need to ensure that we have sufficient Foster homes and supported lodging hosts in the Borough to meet their needs. We have a priority to increase the number of Bury approved Fostering households by at least 20 in 2023/2024.

1.4. This report provides an update as to what changes are being proposed in order to retain our current Foster Carer cohort, as well as significantly increasing our carer recruitment activity. We want Bury to have an attractive offer for prospective carers which competes with other authorities and IFA's. This update for scrutiny panel will offer information about the professional fees and maintenance allowances paid to Bury approved Foster Carers; as well as the range of incentives being proposed to strengthen our current carer offer. There will also be an overview of our recruitment strategy and updated information regarding our ongoing work with the Foster Carer Association, an independent group representative of the wider Foster Carer voice.

2. Foster Carer Fees

- 2.1. Maintenance allowances were uplifted by 2.3% this year, backdated to the start of this financial year which Carers report has had little impact on Foster Carers experiencing challenges with the cost-of-living crisis. Some Bury Foster Carers are reporting that they will be unable to continue Fostering if professional fees and maintenance allowances are not uplifted. Some have told us they are making enquiries with Independent Fostering Agencies where professional fees and maintenance allowances are higher than those being offered by Bury. By improving our professional fees, maintenance allowances and incentives to Foster Carers on an invest to save approach, we will attract more prospective Foster Carers to Bury, retain the skilled and experienced Carers we have, increase our overall placement sufficiency and choice, keep our children and young people in their familiar locality and school and reduce our spend on more costly Independent Fostering Agency and residential placements.
- 2.2. Currently, we are experiencing significant challenges in delivering on our Placement Sufficiency duty. Bury has several challenging contributory factors to address in order to meet our key objectives around placement sufficiency. This includes acknowledging our current Foster Carer offer is not competitive enough in the current market and that this will impact on our ability to recruit and retain Foster Carers. Introducing payments for skills to professional fees enable us to ensure foster Carers are remunerated for their knowledge, skills and experience and places continuous professional development as central to our offer will support recruitment and retention strategies.
- 2.3. Bury approved foster Carers receive professional fees and maintenance allowance in relation to each child they care for, the rates for the professional fees have not been reviewed for over 10 years. We also provide holiday allowance, birthday and Christmas payments, initial clothing payments and mileage (45 pence per mile). The minimum government recommended uplift of 2.3% for 2022-2023 was applied to maintenance allowances, the last increase prior to this was awarded and implemented in January 2019. We have worked closely with Greater Manchester Fostering Leads, Greater Manchester Combined Authorities and Placements Northwest to explore this area. Whilst Bury are not the lowest paying authority but we are not competitive with higher paying neighbouring authorities. Therefore, we have proposed the following uplifts which will be presented to Cabinet in March 2023.
- 2.4. The following table shows the current fees and the proposed lift for both professional and maintenance fee.

Child's Age	Current Professional fee	Proposed uplift			
		Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4

					<i>Mockingbird fees – see Table 4.3</i>
0-4yrs		n/a	£132	£135	
5-10yrs		n/a	£150	£155	
0-10yrs	£130	n/a			
10-15yrs		n/a	£170	£190	
16yrs +		n/a	£198	£222	
11-17yrs	£140	n/a			

2.5. The Maintenance Fee illustrates:

Child's Age	Maintenance fee 2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023 <i>(inc Government Min 2.3% uplift already implemented)</i>	Proposed further uplift <i>(to narrow the gap with GM LA's)</i>
0-4yrs	£138	£141	£148
5-10yrs	£152	£156	£156
11-15yrs	£173	£177	£230
16yrs +	£202	£207	£237

2.6. The following table illustrates the combined professional and maintenance allowances if proposals are accepted

Child's Age	4-year-old	10-year-old	14-year-old	16years +
Bury current	£268	£282	£313	£342
Highest GM	£285	£311	£419	£458
Lowest GM	£135	£149	£177	£215
GM Ranking	2nd	4th	5th	5th
Bury proposed	£280 Level 2 £283 Level 3	£306 Level 2 £311 Level 3	£400 Level 2 £420 Level 3	£435 Level 2 £459 Level 3
Bury proposed GM ranking	2nd Level 3	1st Level 3	1st Level 3	1st Level 3

2.7. We are also proposing uplifts to Birthday, festival, holiday, clothing and graduation allowances. The coloured column represents the uplifts proposed. To the left of it is current allowances.

Age	Birthday		Festival		Holiday		Initial Clothing	Graduation
0-4yrs	£70.50	£150	£141	£200	£352.50	£400	Initial Clothing	£100
5-10yrs	£78.00	£180	£156	£225	£390	£450	(currently determined	£150
11-15yrs	£88.50	£210	£177	£250	£442.50	£475	needs	£200
16yrs +	£103.50	£250	£207	£300	£517.50	£550	led	£250
18yrs +	-	£300 -18 th & 21 st	-	-	-	-	basis)	£100

		Birthday							
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3. Revised Carer offer

- 3.1. We are proposing a range of incentives to strengthen our current offer to Foster Carers that will bring us in line with our neighboring local authorities and make us more competitive with Independent Fostering Agencies prospectively and who approved Foster Carers can choose to register with. The report makes proposals on what our Foster Carer offer needs to look like to retain our current Foster Carer cohort and to attract prospective Carers to Bury Council. Recent enquiries, assisted by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority dataset evidence that other local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies have a wider range of incentives than Bury currently offers.
- 3.2. Council Tax reduction. To encourage new Foster Carers and Supported Lodging hosts and to help retain existing Foster Carers/Supported Lodging Carers within the Borough, it is recommended that the Council Tax Section 13A Discount Policy be amended to provide 50% discretionary council tax discount for all Bury approved mainstream Foster Carers. This discount would not apply to Foster Carers approved with Independent Fostering Agencies. By adopting a Council tax reduction or Bury approved Foster Carers and supported lodgings hosts this will assist us as a council to provide a package of support and rewards that is consistent with the offers made by other local authority's and independent Foster agencies when recruiting.
- 3.3. Adjustment fee This would include a discretionary payment equivalent to the Foster Carer Professional Fee for two weeks agreed by Head of Service at the end of a challenging placement, when a long-term placement comes to an unexpected end, a difficult disruption, or at a time of bereavement for example, to offer some time and space to the Carers without worrying about having no income from Fostering. This also prevents 'burn out' and reduces the pressure Carers experience to immediately accept a new placement when they are simply not ready.
- 3.4. Short breaks offer. Most Independent Fostering Agencies offer their approved Foster Carers an annual 'respite allowance' which we would only view as a 'short break' rather than 'respite'. This will be 7 days for which they are paid but the child or young person stays with a different Foster carer. Whilst we do not routinely advocate the use of short breaks as we would want our child or young person to be fully included in family life, we also acknowledge that some Carers and young people genuinely need this space from one another for the placement to be sustained in the long term. We propose we offer our approved Foster Carers the option of 7 nights paid short breaks per year, where if they do not use it, they do not lose it but could be paid instead at a particular point in the year.
- 3.5. Retainer fee this would be a strong incentive offer to help conversions from enquiry to application to alleviate the worry of Carers being able to financially manage if there was a gap in between placements. Not all Carers would need a retainer as our demand for placements is so high, but it would be a welcomed incentive and certainly contribute increased conversions if this were in place. We would like to propose a minimum retainer fee linked to the day rate equivalent of the Professional Fee for 4 weeks maximum per year per Fostering household.
- 3.6. PAMS Assist/ Silver Cloud We wish to continue the employee benefit scheme extended to Foster Carers which covers emotional / wellbeing support as well as

financial and legal advice. This low cost service but is a robust accessible form of support. Carers have fed back that they like knowing it is there and see this as an additional support for them as Foster Carers. Mental Health support offers following the Covid Pandemic has been reassuring for them.

- 3.7. Blue Light Card. This is a discount service for the emergency services, NHS, social care sector and armed forces, providing members with thousands of discounts online and on the high street. Blue Light card holders can download an App and access a huge range of discounts for the family. The cost of this benefit is £5 fee payable every three years, the service would consider this a positive “add-on” incentive which adds to the retention offer at little cost.
- 3.8. Max Cards. The Max Card is the UK’s leading discount card for cared for and looked after children. Families can use their Max Card at venues across the UK to get free or discounted admission. Bury Council already purchases the Max card for our children and young people. We propose this continues annually as part of the carer offer.

4. Mockingbird Model

4.1 The evidence-based Fostering model called ‘The Mockingbird model’ originally developed by the Fostering Network is being widely used by authorities across England. The Mockingbird model will support us to offer some of our more traumatized children and young people homes with highly skilled and experienced Carers, further reducing the need for high cost specialist IFA and residential placements for some children, supporting placement sufficiency and efficient use of Council resources. Taken from the DfE Evaluation Report (September 2020) ‘*The Mockingbird programme aims to replicate the support available through an extended family network. It creates a constellation of 6 to 10 satellite fostering families who are supported by 1 hub home that is operated by an experienced foster carer, offering planned and emergency sleepovers, advice, training and peer support. The Mockingbird programme worked to meet the need for continuity and support for children and young people in care and for additional support for foster carers.*

4.2 If Cabinet agrees the proposals in March, the first phase of Mockingbird will be immediately rolled out. Starting with a Mockingbird Project Lead from Fostering Network training the service staff and a plan being formulated for the first constellation. We hope to have our first constellation up and running by the end of the year.

4.3 The table illustrated below sets out our combined professional fees and maintenance allowances for Level 4 for Mockingbird specialist fostering Carers, bands are based on the Individual needs of the child placed and the Carers experience and skills.

	0-4 yrs.	5-10 yrs.	11-15 yrs.	16yrs plus
Level 4 band A	£594.49	£594.49	£594.49	£594.49
Level 4 band B	£605.12	£605.12	£605.12	£605.12
Level 4	£615.74	£615.74	£615.74	£615.74

band C				
Level 4 band D	£626.34	£626.34	£626.34	£626.34
Level 4 band E	£636.96	£636.96	£636.96	£636.96

The Hub Carer is paid £33,121 per annum, the equivalent of Level 4, Band E plus 16yrs plus.

5. Recruitment Strategy

- 5.1. We have revised our Recruitment Strategy to incorporate not only more enhanced recruitment activity, but also other work streams which will enhance our overall recruitment and placement sufficiency duty. In 2022-2023 we had various recruitment and marketing campaigns (in house) which included; Boosted posts on Facebook, and google ad word campaign, Targeted events; Bury Pride, Mental health awareness week, Foster Care Fortnight theme, Jubilee celebration event , Armed Forces Community Event, Sons & Daughters month, Advert on Hits Radio in collaboration with 10 GM LA's, Drop in events, Webinars, Information stands in the community, Branded Foster with Bury banners displayed on park railings around Bury, A collaborative Fostering Campaign – theme “Keep siblings together”, Fostering World Cup challenge, Adverts on 2 x digital LED display boards in Bury Town Centre.
- 5.2. In 2023-2024 we will benefit from a refreshed strategy as well as participating in a GM wide digital marketing campaign to benefit all 10 GM authorities. Our new strategy will include; Increasing our Carer Ambassadors with GM funds; more in house marketing activity throughout the year plus additional marketing activity from GM Ambassadors leading to an overall increase in enquiries, Embedding Fostering Network Mockingbird Programme and create ‘step down’ placements for at least 2-3 young people; explore developing our own Parent and Child approved carers so we have in house sufficiency; An ongoing schedule of recruitment webinars (with neighbouring localities) Various press releases and support for campaigns including Foster Care Fortnight, Sons and Daughters month and Pride with a focus on recruiting LGBTQ+ foster carers. Hits radio advertising (across GM) Drop-in and community events; Incentive based activities for foster carers and children. Targeted digital marketing tools. Carefully placed outdoor media. Targeted / geographical community engagement. Targeted approaches via specific employment settings. Diary of regular posts on the Council (fostering specific and corporate) social platforms (such as promoting the monthly webinars) to help reach a wider audience. Focussed motivational Messages including: *Let's change lives together – Foster with Bury. Foster carers change lives. Providing safe local homes for local children. Offering a local child a loving home and a brighter future. Helping to make young people's dreams come true. No two children are the same, that's why there are different kinds of fostering placements. Age, marital status and sexual orientation are never a barrier to becoming a foster carer. Could you change a child's life?* Use current intelligence.
- 5.3. Further recruitment strategy approaches include: using data intelligence and targeting 45+ age groups whom are most likely to be motivated to foster; reviewing

and refreshing the Foster with Bury website narrative to ensure visitors can quickly understand the Bury local offer and feel motivated by it; Creating embedded videos and podcasts, case studies/blogs; developing a Secure 'login' area for approved carers to access training, newsletters, event info etc. Build in the 'Let's Do It!' branding - *Let's change lives together*.

- 5.4. Commission a graphic designer to build feedback into new brand concepts/options for testing, approval and roll out. New branding to be reflected across all service collateral i.e., website, social media and digital/printed materials. Maximising the output of committed spend and existing resources: Building on the existing schedule of community engagement we will create a branded newsletter template to keep existing foster carers updated and ensure they feel valued and motivated.

6. Foster Care Association

- 6.1. In Bury, we have a strong Foster Carer Association who act as the voice of the wider Foster Carer Group. In previous years (pre 2020), the Association have not felt included in wider service developments and felt there was a 'them' and 'us' culture. The Association Representatives and Service Lead/Managers now work closely together to ensure there is as much involvement as possible in-service developments. The Association have been very positive about our new working relationship. Forums are held twice a year for Foster Carers and Senior Leaders. Between these times the Association meet on a regular basis and often ask Senior Managers to join them for part of their meeting which works well.
- 6.2. Jeanette Richards and Annette Hope last met with the Association on 17th February to provide updates about the progress of the revised foster carer offer and what this would look like. The Association were satisfied the revised offer was appropriate and were very positive about the working together relationship between senior staff and themselves.
- 6.3. The Association also are becoming involved in other service development areas, for example updating the Foster Carer Handbook in a working group with Staff. The Association agree that there are exciting changes afloat which they embrace being part of.

7. Action Taken and Conclusion

- The report for Cabinet has been completed and will be presented in March 2023.
- We are working closely with the Association whom are fully up to date with the revised offer and further developments to enhance recruitment and retention. They met with Jeanette Richards and Annette Hope recently for more detailed updates of the revised offer and remain enthusiastic about future working together.
- We provided all fostering families and supported lodgings providers with a £200 cost of living payment in December 2022.
- We have increased mileage rates for carers
- We have consulted with Fostering Network about purchasing and implementing Mockingbird services
- We have revised our Recruitment Strategy
- We are participating in the wider digital marketing campaign with GMCA to increase carer enquiries.

The department are acutely aware of the impact the cost-of-living crisis is having on foster caring families who are caring for our children. We acknowledge we urgently need to 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](#)

Independent Review of Children's Social Care; Josh Macalister 2022 [Final Report - The Independent Review of Children's Social Care \(childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk\)](#)

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Executive Director sign off Date: _____

JET Meeting Date: _____