

Report to:	Cabinet	Date: 15 March 2023
Subject:	Foster Carer Professional Fees, Maintenance Allowances and Incentives	
Report of	Cabinet Member for Children and Young People	

1. Summary

- 1.1 There is an ongoing national crisis in terms of Foster Carer recruitment and retention and placement sufficiency for children and young people needing to live 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. It has been 15 years since there was a review of the support we provide to our foster carers.
- 1.2 In June 2022 Cabinet approved a proposed restructure of our fostering service, which afforded the opportunity to establish separate teams to focus upon the specialisms within fostering of recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers, the support functions and a bespoke team to assess and support kinship carers.
- 1.3 This was considered as critical to laying the foundation for growing our fostering business.
- 1.4 The restructuring of the service has been implemented and the service is working with our communications team to launch a media campaign to promote fostering in Bury.
- 1.5 Bury are also part of the wider GM programme, we have received £10k to support marketing activity and promote the Council as a fostering friendly authority.
- 1.6 This report provides Cabinet with information about the professional fees and maintenance allowances paid to Bury approved Foster Carers and how we compare to other Greater Manchester authorities. 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.
- 1.7 This report also proposes 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.

- 1.8 The report provides Cabinet with information to consider the amendment of Council Tax Section 13A Discount Policy, in relation to applying discretionary council tax relief to approved Foster Carers and Supported Lodgings Hosts for Bury commencing in the year 2024/25. If agreed this relief will serve to improve the financial support and will improve both the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers in Borough.
- 1.9 This report will provide Cabinet with information around an evidence-based Fostering model called 'The Mockingbird model' originally developed by the Fostering Network. The Mockingbird model will support us to offer some of our more traumatized children and young people homes with highly skilled and experienced Carers. This will further reduce the need for 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'*.
- 1.10 In addition, the report will outline Bury's involvement in the development of a 'Regional Foster Carer Recruitment Campaign and Hub' via a Greater Manchester Combined Authority alongside 7 other Greater Manchester authorities, which will complement our Foster Carer recruitment strategies and assist in an increase in approvals of fostering families.

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 It is recommended that cabinet agree to an uplift in Foster Carer professional fees and maintenance allowances to bring us into line with higher paying Greater Manchester local authorities.
- 2.2 It is recommended that Cabinet approve the implementation of professional fees being linked to payments for skills to professional fees for Foster Carers on a four-level basis providing career progression to Carers.
- 2.3 It is recommended that Cabinet agree to the implementation of the Mockingbird Model within Bury Fostering Services.
- 2.3 It is recommended that cabinet agree to applying a 50% Council tax discount from foster carers payable Council tax bills to Bury. This payment for 2023/24 will be given to the carers by way of an allowance increase.
- 2.4 Note that as part of the budget setting process for 2024/25 Council will be asked to approve an amendment to the discretionary support scheme to formalise a change to the Council tax billing arrangements.
- 2.5 It is recommended that Cabinet agree to the outlined incentives to strengthen our current offer to Foster Carers, attract more Foster Carers to Bury and retain our current cohort of approved Carers.

3. Reasons for recommendation(s)

- 3.1 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 newly approved Bury Fostering households by at least 20 in 2023/2024.

- 3.2 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 ultimately reduce our spend on more costly Independent Fostering Agency and residential placements. This will need to be achieved progressively, as additional capacity is created, and children require new homes. Children in settled, long-term placements with IFA foster carers will remain in those homes. The proposed changes in fees and allowances will require a bespoke communications strategy, both locally within Bury and harnessing the opportunity of the wider Greater Manchester recruitment hub.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 By incorporating the Mockingbird Model and carrying out targeted recruitment to become specialist Mockingbird Hub Carer or Foster Carer, we will have available family homes for our children and young people who have experienced trauma who may have otherwise needed to move to costly specialist therapeutic Independent Fostering Agency placements or residential children's homes. Identifying placements for children who have experienced trauma can often result in moving them out of area and to higher cost placements.
- 3.5 Adopting a Council Tax exemption for Bury approved Foster Carers and Supported Lodgings hosts 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. It will also assist to increase the housing sufficiency to care leavers by encouraging more Supported Lodgings hosts to be assessed.
- 3.6 Improving our range of incentives will support our recruitment and retention strategies and help us to convey to foster carers the value that we place on them and the work they do day in day out to support our children and young people.

4. Alternative options considered and rejected

- 4.1 The alternative option is to not uplift professional fees, maintenance allowances and incentives to Bury approved Foster Carers or strengthen the current carer offer and to leave it how it currently is. This is not recommended as it would not support us to increase the number of Bury Foster Carers needed nor would it support us to retain our current skilled and experienced Foster Carers. It would not support the increase in the number of Supported Lodging hosts. It would not increase our placement sufficiency and, recent history suggests, will result in an increased dependence on Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements. In considering the proposal, it is important to note that the spend on IFA foster homes for Bury children in care has risen by nearly £1M in the past two years, a 35% increase. This increase reflects a shift in the balance of those providing foster homes towards private providers and the cost of that provision, rather than an increase in the number of children in Bury's care, which increased by 6% across the same period. If we do not strengthen our Carer offer, we

will not be in line with our partner Greater Manchester authorities or be able to compete with Independent Fostering Agencies and our dependence on private providers will only increase. Not only will prospective Carers be likely to choose to join an Independent Fostering Agency first; but we may also lose some of our cohort of approved Carers to Independent Fostering Agencies because of Foster Carer fees and allowances. In the last 3 years we have only lost two fostering households to an Independent Fostering Agency, one more household has recently indicated their intention to resign and move to an Independent Fostering Agency.

- 4.2 If we do not explore this available evidence-based Mockingbird model, we will continue to need to place our children and young people in high-cost Independent Fostering Agency and Residential placements and spending will increase. Children experiencing trauma will continue to be placed in costly specialist therapeutic placements, rather than potentially being cared for within a skilled Mockingbird trained and supported family environment within the locality of Bury. Several of our Greater Manchester partner authorities have already implemented the Mockingbird model as part of their Fostering service and practice. This has proved hugely successful for many Carers', children and young people. It is an evidence-based, strength-based model with high levels of support from other satellite Carers and a 'Hub' Carer to not only help sustain the placement for the child or young person and reduce risk of breakdown but also to support them in the family home via a therapeutic model of parenting and support. It is provisionally agreed that Stockport will provide the valuable mentoring and support we require to ensure this model is successful.

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5. Background

- 5.1 The Council has experienced an increase in the number of children coming into care. At the time of writing this report we have 371 children in our care. This has placed 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 increases spend against the agency budget.
- 5.2 The Council also has 140 Care Leavers aged 18 years or older, and we need to ensure sufficient options are available for them to Stay Put with Foster Carers after they turn 18 years of age or to enable them to live in a Supported Lodgings placement, which is a scheme where host households provide supported accommodation to young people preparing to leave care until they are able to move onto their own tenancies.
- 5.3 General Foster carer conversion from application to approval has been significantly affected during the two years of Covid. 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. To improve placement sufficiency in the

Borough, we need to increase the number of Bury Foster Carers and Supported Lodging hosts available.

6. Current Position

Placement Sufficiency

- 6.1. Currently, we are experiencing significant challenges in delivering on our Placement Sufficiency duty. Sufficiency of homes for children also impacts upon our ability to effectively match childrens needs with carers skills and attributes. Our current placement stability is poor. Bury has several challenging contributory factors to address 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. Revising the current carer professional fees, maintenance allowances and incentives will support recruitment and retention strategies. Given the difficulties of recruitment for all local authority. Retaining the skilled and experienced Carers that we have is even more important still.

Current Foster Carers Households

- 6.2 The table below shows our current 'recruited' foster carer capacity, data and the approvals currently in place. There is some lower occupancy than other authorities' data show us, this in the main is due to the size of their own family, solo placements, size of the space available and some only being approved for one child as a result.

Recruited households	Total number of children approved for	Vacancies
Mainstream/Recruited	107 spaces for children and young people.	4 true vacancies 2 for babies only with 2 more vacancies after March 9 vacancies on hold due to allegations or family circumstances.
Respite/Short breaks only	5	2

The below table evidences our looked after children cohort and the types of placements they are currently in. Households who care for 76 of our Bury children within their families, known as Friends and Families foster care, approved for specific children only – ie those connected to them as a family. These families are assessed and approved for those specific connected children only.

Friends & Family placements	Mainstream/Recruited carer Placements	Independent Fostering Agency placements (IFA)	Other placement types (residential, secure, Supported Lodgings)
76	77	79	6 SL 23 Residential 1 secure

- 6.3 At the end of November 2022 67% of looked after children in Bury were being cared for in a foster placement, this is lower than 2020/2021 statistical comparators with the England average being 71% and our Statistical neighbour being 68%.

- 6.4 Bury has a lower percentage of children living in our own placements (this includes all placement type's) at 46% which is lower than Statistical comparators with the England average being 48% and Statistical neighbour average being 53%. In summary, this means that Bury have fewer children in our care living in foster placements, family homes that we provide, as opposed to purchasing from the wider market. This makes Bury more vulnerable to the increased cost of placements for children and young people in our care and also limits our ability to ensure the quality of those homes.

Fostering Fees and allowances

- 6.5 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.
- 6.6 We also offer support with equipment as needed, for example for a baby, fostering bedroom furniture, replacement items.
- 6.7 Foster Carers receive a range of allowances for each child they care for including holiday allowance, birthday and Christmas payments, initial clothing payments and mileage (45 pence per mile).
- 6.8 We currently offer foster Carers the following incentives, membership of our fostering network, PAMS Assist, Silver Cloud service and Max discount cards for children. However other local authorities offer wider incentives i.e., Council Tax relief.
- 6.9 We provide a robust and attractive training and development programme to foster Carers to support the mandatory training requirements which cover a wide range of topics to skill our Carers. Attendance at training aimed to skill our Carers is not currently linked to payment for skills and overall attendance at training is poor.

Voice of Foster Carers

- 6.10 Foster Carers have an active Foster Care Association that provide a representative voice and link directly to the service, they have sought the views of Bury Foster Carers and are a representative voice for the wider carer group. The Association seeks the views of Bury Foster Carers Bury and are a representative voice of the wider care group. Recently the Association have voiced concerns about two significant issues firstly, cost-of-living crisis and carer fees and 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. And express the view that we should invest more into Bury Fostering service and that financial support to Bury Carers needs to increase to assist with the recruitment of new Carers and to retain our existing Carers. The Association have received feedback that Bury Foster Carers are approaching Independent Fostering Agencies to gain information regarding the financial and support benefits of transferring. We are aware they have submitted their concerns which link into the 'Cost of Living Report' (published this year by Fostering Network) to the DCS group.

Independent Fostering Agency, Semi-independent and Residential costs

- 6.11 The cost of Independent Foster Agency placements is significantly higher. Bury Foster Care placements costs on average £383 per week. The lowest independent fostering agency home costs £578 per week and the highest cost is £1,800. The average cost across all age ranges is £1000.

- 6.12 Some Independent Fostering Agency costs are stabilised via the Northwest Framework contract. Other Independent Fostering Agency not on this contract charge notably higher fees. Therefore, any increase in Bury Foster Care placements secured because of supporting this proposal will reduce the reliance on high-cost Independent Fostering Agency placements and achieve significant savings.
- 6.13 The cost of semi-independent provision ranges from £1,000 to £3,295 per week, depending upon the needs of the young person, plus there is an additional weekly living allowance, payable. The average cost of a supported lodgings host is £510. Therefore, any increase in Bury supported Lodgings placements secured because of supporting this proposal will reduce the reliance on higher cost semi-independent placements and achieve significant savings.
- 6.14 The cost of residential placement varies between £3,375 and £10,600 per week depending on the type of residential placement, whether education and therapy are included, as well as ratio of support for young person's needs. The average cost of residential placements is £5,000 but this can vary on a daily basis depending on the placements that are available and the complexity/needs of the child or young person.

Specialist Fostering Model

- 6.15 We do not currently have a specialist fostering model. Our vision is to increase the numbers of approved Bury foster Carers via an enhanced offer to support the delivery of the Mockingbird model, enabling us to have available, experienced, and skilled Carers who are offered a high level of support to care for children who have experienced trauma and have higher level needs. These children may otherwise need a residential placement or indeed a 'solo' fostering placement; which could effectively prevent a Carer approved for 3 children being able to care for 3 because of the risks involved placing alongside other children.

The Mockingbird Model for Fostering

- 6.16 The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) is an alternative way of providing foster care. It involves Foster Carers being part of a group of a constellation of around 6 -10 fostering homes described as 'satellite foster homes'; they are supported by a central 'hub' home, which provides resources and support to the satellite homes. The hub home and the satellite homes are supported by the Fostering service which provides a worker to take on a liaison role across the hub. The aim of the model is to create a support network like that of an extended family, providing children and Carers with support, including sleepovers where appropriate and shared social activities.
- 6.17 The aims of the Mockingbird Family Model are to improve placement stability for children who are looked after, prioritise sibling connections, promote active child protection, support permanence and improve the support provided to Foster Carers, so that the local authority can retain Foster Carers and reduce feelings of isolation for them. The model was developed in Washington State, USA, and fits with the strengths-based approach of putting families at the centre of finding solutions and solving problems, using restorative approaches. The model is evidence and strength based, has been formally evaluated and shows improved outcomes for children, young people and enhances the skills of foster carers and their retention.
- 6.18 The support provided through the hub home includes:
- Monthly social events for families, providing peer interaction and support for caregivers, children and young people;

- Unlimited access to social support and mentoring for satellite Carers;
- Planned and emergency respite care 24/7, including day care and overnight stays; and
- Help to navigate the system and access community resources.

6.19 A key feature of the Mockingbird Family Model is that it helps to take good care of the people who take care of children and young people.

7. Foster Carer professional fees and maintenance allowances

7.1 There is a current need to review and Bury the professional fees and maintenance allowances afforded to Bury approved foster Carers to ensure that we are competitive in a challenging Fostering market where local authorities and private foster companies are all striving to recruit Carers. The impact of an uplift in fees and allowances will be positive as the decision will improve the availability of Foster Carers for our children in care, allowing them to live in the borough and maintain School placements and links to family and friends. Foster Carers are our biggest resource in providing placements and supports to children in care, we need to strive to ensure that we actively recruit to this role and support current Carers to remain with the Bury Fostering service.

7.2 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. This increase removed a reduction that place for a second and subsequent children placed which was serving as disincentive to care for sibling groups. This uplift was well received however in consulting recently with the Bury Foster Carer Association, it is timely to review this again and ensure Bury payments are in line within other Greater Manchester local authorities. The 2.3% uplift was applied and backdated to the start of the financial year; Foster Carers welcomed the increase but have told us that this uplift did not go far enough and has had little or no impact on the challenges they face with the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

7.3 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. Bury are not the lowest paying authority but we are not competitive with higher paying neighbouring authorities and this impacts on our ability to recruit and retain foster Carers. An illustration of the combined professional fees and maintenance allowances are below:

Child's Age	4-year-old	10-year-old	14-year-old	16years +
Bury	£268	£282	£313	£342
Highest GM	£285	£311	£419	£458
Lowest GM	£135	£149	£177	£215
GM Ranking	2nd	4th	5th	5th

7.4 The table below shows the professional fees currently being paid to foster Carers, for each child placed per week by age.

Child's Age	Professional fee
0 - 10yrs	£130
11 - 17yrs	£140

We are proposing to increase the Professional fees linked to payment of skills for foster Carers and our specialist Mockingbird model to:

Age	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4 (Mockingbird)
0 - 4yrs	n/a	£132	£135	See 7.7 below:
5 -10yrs	n/a	£150	£155	
10 - 15yrs	n/a	£170	£190	
16yrs +	n/a	£198	£222	

7.5 The table below highlights the current Maintenance Allowance paid to foster Carers for each child placed, per week and by age and the proposed uplift.

Child's Age	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023 (inc Government Min 2.3% uplift)	Further uplift to narrow the gap with GM LA's
0 - 4yrs	£138	£141	£148
5 - 10yrs	£152	£156	£156
11 - 15yrs	£173	£177	£230
16yrs plus	£202	£207	£237

We propose a percentage uplift of 6% to 34% applied to place Bury amongst the highest paying Greater Manchester local authorities.

7.6 The table below is an illustration of the combined professional fees 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	1 st Level 3	1 st Level 3

7.6 The table 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 band C	£615.74	£615.74	£615.74	£615.74
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 16yrs plus.

8. Birthday, Festival, Holiday and Clothing allowances

The table below outlines the current birthday, festival, holiday and clothing allowances paid by Bury.

Age	Birthday	Festival	Holiday	Clothing Allowance*
0-4yrs	70.50	141.00	£352.50	-
5-10yrs	78.00	156.00	£390.00	--
11-15yrs	88.50	177.00	£442.50	--
16yrs +	103.50	207.00	£517.50	--

*Please note the initial clothing allowance is currently determined on a child's initial needs at the time of placement.

It is proposed that we increase the allowances paid to Carers for birthdays, festivals, holiday and clothing allowances for children.

Age	Birthday	Festival	Holiday	Initial Clothing up to*	Graduation
0-4yrs	£150	£200	£400	£100	-
5-10yrs	£180	£225	£450	£150	-
11-15yrs	£210	£250	£475	£200	-
16yrs +	£250	£300	£550	£250	-
18yrs +	£300 -18 th & 21 st Birthday	-	-	-	£100

*The initial clothing allowance is up to and will be determined on the child's individual needs and circumstance.

9. Special Guardianship Allowances

Allowances are paid to the Special Guardians of children subject of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) equivalent to those paid to Foster Carers. This proposal will therefore impact on the SGO allowances paid to 125 Carers. SGO Carers are entitled to Professional Fee for 2 years if a previous foster carer and a SGO allowance (maintenance allowance equivalent) until 18yrs less child benefit and any other child benefits. Allowances are subject to annual financial assessments.

10. Council Tax reduction

- 10.1. 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 from 2024/25. This discount would not apply to Foster Carers approved with Independent Fostering Agencies.
- 10.2 It is also recommended that the Council Tax Section 13A Discount Policy be amended to provide 50% discretionary council tax discount for all Bury approved Supported Lodging Carers who support Bury Care leavers from 2024/25.

- 10.3 Bury Council Tax already offer discretionary relief to over 65's and Care Leavers and will work with CYP and Finance colleagues to develop this new proposal for Foster Care and Supported Lodgings relief in compliance with Section 13a of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 from 2024/25. For 2023/24 a payment equivalent to the 50% discount on the foster carers council tax that is payable will be made monthly in addition to their monthly allowance
- 10.4 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. It will assist to increase the housing sufficiency to care leavers by encouraging more Supported Lodgings hosts to be assessed. As Corporate Parents to Children in Care we need to ensure that children can live in Bury as their hometown and stay connected to family and friends. We need to ensure that we have sufficient foster homes and supported lodging hosts in the Borough to meet the needs of children and young people in care and care leavers and to provide them with the opportunity to live in a family home. We have a priority to increase the number of Bury approved Fostering households by **20** in 2023/2024. This needs to increase by a further **15** to achieve the 2025/26 savings target.
- 10.5 By improving our financial support offer and incentives to Bury approved Foster Carers living in Bury we will be able to recruit more prospective Foster Carers whom 'choose' Bury Council as their registered Fostering agency and provide more local homes for children and young people in our care.
- 10.6 Cost implications for this offer are outlined towards the end of this report.

11. Further incentives to strengthen our Foster Carer Offer

- 11.1 **Adjustment fee** This would include a discretionary payment equivalent to the Foster Carer Professional Fee for two weeks. This will be 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. We have recently experienced approximately 10 placements ending for a variety of these reasons listed above where the Carers would have met these criteria and benefited from this additional support.
- 11.2 **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. This would be for carer Professional fee element only, not the child maintenance element.
- 11.3 **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. Some Councils offer a retainer fee of 8 weeks per

year for their approved foster Carers. 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. As stated, demand for placements is high and there are rarely vacancies, however this has happened in this reporting year for example when a carer only cares for babies.

- 11.4 **PAMS Assist / Silver Cloud** continue the employee benefit scheme extended to Foster Carers which covers emotional / wellbeing support as well as financial and legal advice. This is not a hugely expensive 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. The PAM Assist / Silver Cloud annual cost is £5.48 per person. We have funded this at a cost of £948.04 for 2022/23 and wish to continue with this offer into 2023-2024.
- 11.5 **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.
- 11.6 **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 at £10 per child approximately aged 3 years and over. We propose this continues annually as part of the carer offer.

Financial Implications

The Council has savings proposals from the implementation of the Mockingbird model of £0.120m in 2024/25 increasing by a further £0.604m in 2025/26. Proposals identified in this paper for 2024/25 would meet this saving but would need to be expanded for the 2025/26 saving of £0.604m.

Summary of Financial Implications (future years do not include inflation)

Detailed Costs of Implementation	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026
Carer fees & allowances			
Foster Carer Fee	214,006	214,006	214,006
Fostering Allowance	173,160	173,160	173,160
SGO Allowance	52,868	52,868	52,868
Council Tax	73,500	73,500	73,500
Adjustment fee	3,360	3,360	3,360
Retainer fee	3,360	3,360	3,360
Continuation of PAMS Assist / Silver Cloud	1,000	1,000	1,000
Blue Light/Max Cards	1,000	1,000	1,000
Short Break Offer	14,700	14,700	14,700
Additional payments Birthday, Holiday & Festivals	61,500	61,500	61,500
Mocking Bird Model- Hub Carer Costs	33,121	66,242	66,242

Mocking Bird Model	48,000	16,500	
Total Cost	679,575	681,196	664,696

Anticipated Savings of Implementation	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026
Average cost of IFA £1000 p.w. -Annual Cost of 20 IFA placements in 23/24 increasing to 25 placements in 24/25 and 40 in 25/26	1,040,000	1,300,000	2,080,000
Average cost in-house placements £383 p.w. Annual cost	(398,320)	(497,900)	(796,640)
Total Anticipated Savings	641,680	802,100	1,283,360

Nett (Cost)/Savings	(37,895)	120,904	618,664
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Carer fees & allowances

Foster Carer Fee: Current spend on Foster Carer Fee is £17k per week, based on the current children placed with Foster Carers. The proposed uplift would increase this to £21k an increase of £4k per week and equates to **£214k per annum.**

Fostering Allowance: Bury have already adopted the minimum recommended uplift of 2.3%. It is proposed that Bury match or better our statistical neighbours to increase recruitment and retention, this recommendation would increase the annual cost by **£173k.**

SGO Allowances: these are set equivalent to those of Bury Fostering Allowances. This proposal will therefore impact on the budget for SGO Allowances too. We currently pay 125 SGO Carers. The proposal is an increase has a financial implication of **£53k per annum.**

Council Tax

Funding will increase when the numbers of approved Bury Foster Carers increases however this will be offset by reducing the reliance on high costs of commissioned independent placements for children in care. Based on Council Tax Band D the total cost of providing the Council Tax relief proposed for 87 households at a discount of 50% would be approximately £0.073m per annum. Payments in 23/4 and discounts in 24/5 will be based on actual Council tax paid by the foster carers. This payment/discount will only be applicable for those Bury foster carers resident within Bury.

Estimate for this proposal: **£0.073m per annum,**

Adjustment fee 2 weeks

Estimate for this proposal: 12 placements ending, x2 weeks carer fee at £140 per week **£3,360 per annum**

Short Break offer

x105 households at £140 for 7 nights (carer fee element only)

Estimate for this proposal: **£14,700**

Retainer fee a minimum retainer fee of £20 per day (equivalent to the daily professional rate for Carers) for 4 weeks per year when and if required. Only 6 Carers would have taken advantage of this in the last year therefore our estimate will be based upon this.

Estimate for this proposal: approximately **£3,360 for a minimum of 6 Carers**

Continuation of PAMS Assist / Silver Cloud

Continuation of the PAM Assist / Silver Cloud annual cost is £5.48 per person

Estimate for this proposal: **£948.**

Blue Light Card

The cost of this benefit is £5 fee payable every three years. we have approx. 105 households. £525 every 3 years.

Estimate for this proposal: **£175 per annum**

Max Cards

£10 per child approx. aged 3 years and over

Estimate for this proposal: **£875.00**

Mockingbird Model – Fostering Network License & 4 phases of implementation, training and support

Phase 1: £32,000 plus Vat (this will be the first-year license, training, set up and intensive support & project lead)

Phase 2: £16,000 plus VAT (ongoing community package and operation license, support, training, events etc)

Phase 3: £7,000 plus VAT (this is for when the authority has between 1-5 Constellations in place, support, events, training and licenses)

Phase 4: £9500 plus VAT (this is for when an authority has between 6-10 constellations – Bury will not have this as we are a small authority)

Estimate for this proposal: **£64,500** for Phases one and two for the next 2 years

Links with the Corporate Priorities:

1. *Let's Do It For Children in Bury: We have a duty to provide our children and young people with a choice of fostering families to suit their wishes and needs. We need to keep our children and young people with our Bury families for them to remain in localities they are familiar with, can access their same schools, friends and extracurricular activities easily and for us to have good oversight of the care provided. This includes retaining our current Carer cohort and recruiting many more through a range of strategies.*
 2. *Transformation of Childrens Services - Alongside our social care restructure, transformation of the Fostering Service is required to bring us in line with our neighboring authorities within GM. We not only need to increase our current pool of available families, we need to be in a position to offer different types of placements for varying levels of need and trauma.*
 3. *Children's Services OFSTED Improvement Plan - Increasing sufficiency and recruiting more Carers is a key component of our improvement plan for the fostering service.*
 4. *Financial sustainability and MTFs savings priorities - Our aim is to create an additional 20 fostering households in 2023-2024 to prevent us from needing to go outside of the authority, using IFA's and costly Residential placements. Recruitment and retention of Foster Carers as well as implementing models which will provide a wider variety of placement options will ultimately reduce our spend on costly specialist placements. Funding long term foster care placements with our own approved local authority foster Carers will also contribute to savings going forward (as opposed to long term agency funding)*
 5. *Permanence Strategy 2020 - 2024 - All of our children will have a permanence plan which will be subject to change through their time being looked after by the authority. The larger our Foster Carer cohort, the more options we will have to ratify children's foster placements as long term and permanent. We have ratified thus far 37 IFA placements as long term and are committed to that long term IFA funding. However our preference is for our children to have permanence plans with internal provisions rather than external. We wish first and foremost for children to have the opportunity to reside with their friends and family wherever possible so that mainstream foster care, IFA foster care and residential placements are not required.*
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Equality Impact and Considerations:

6. The eligibility criteria and application process in relation to the Section 13A Policy will ensure that no particular groups of individuals are excluded.
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Environmental Impact and Considerations:

7. N/A

Assessment and Mitigation of Risk:

8. This paper sets out the opportunities, risks and mitigation. This is an invest to save proposal which will enable us to improve placement sufficiency and meet the needs of children and young people whilst ensuring more efficient use of Council resources.

Legal Implications:

The legislative framework allows for the payments to foster carers to ensure as a Local Authority we meet our sufficiency duty in accordance with s 22G of the Children Act 1989 and placement preference in accordance with s22 C (7) Children Act 1989. The sufficiency duty states that as far as reasonably practicable the local authority has a duty to provide children with accommodation within its area that meets the needs of those children, it does recognise that some children need to be placed outside the local area for their welfare. Sufficiency statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children was published in 2010.

The Fostering Services regulations provide for written agreements with the foster carer at the time of the approval and are reviewed annually with the Carer. All foster carers approved under Regulation 27 of the 2011 Fostering Services Regulations will receive a weekly allowance. The Government sets a minimum national allowance across the range of age bands.

Financial Implications:

The 2023/24 budget approved by Council on the 22nd February 2023 contained a number of savings proposals to close the £31m financial gap, that would be delivered over a number of financial years. This proposal is an invest to save scheme which supports our internal foster carers recruitment not only through financial means but also with enhanced support.

There is a small cost in the first year which will be absorbed by the service with savings being delivered in 24/25 and increasing in 25/26 as more internal foster carers are recruited

Background papers:

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

This report highlights the cost of living crisis which has been increasing across the UK since early 2021. The annual rate of inflation in June 2022 was the highest it has been since 1982, affecting the affordability of goods and services for households. Household energy tariffs and fuel costs are also increasing. From June 2021 to June 2022, domestic gas prices increased by 95% and domestic electricity prices by 54%. This report evidences results from one of the largest independent surveys of foster carers to date with responses collated from 4,349 carers from across the United Kingdom. At the time of the survey (July 22), respondents cared for approximately 6,702 children. This represents around ten percent of all children currently living in foster care in the U.K. Key recommendations are: The fostering allowance to be increased in line with the cost of caring for a child in 2022/23. Mileage allowance paid for all mileage covered at the national recommended rate of 45p/p/mile. HMRC to review the £10,000 tax exemption level for foster carers. All fostering services to be aware of the reported increased in carer mental health difficulties due to the cost of living and to address this with carers during supervision, so they can take steps to support foster carers appropriately. Foster carers to be recognised as care professionals within the sector.

2. Fostering Network Mockingbird Programme update 2021 [Mockingbird Programme Update 2021.pdf \(thefosteringnetwork.org.uk\)](#)

Mockingbird is a pioneering programme delivered by The Fostering Network in partnership with 62 fostering services across the UK. The programme nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community of six to ten satellite families called a constellation. As of November 2021, there are 84 Mockingbird constellations in England, Wales, and Scotland. Each is led by a hub home carer and liaison worker; the constellation offers vital peer support and guidance alongside social activities and sleepovers to strengthen relationships and permanence. View our latest programme update to see where we are working and impact our sites are reporting. The 2021 update provides information how Mockingbird families have navigated through the pandemic. At the start of 2020, Mockingbird families across the world experienced lockdown restrictions, in response to the spread of Covid-19. This meant the normal everyday activities that provide vital support to these communities had to stop, and staying at home became the new way of life. However, within weeks the carers and young people found new and creative ways to stay connected and support one another through the crisis. Not only did established communities adapt, thrive and continue to provide support to one another, but new shoots sprang up too. Despite the challenges of lockdown restrictions 17 new constellations successfully launched, albeit online or at distance to begin with, the lockdown didn't stop Mockingbird growing even further throughout the UK

3. Mockingbird programme Evaluation report September 2020 [Mockingbird Programme offers increased capacity 'normality' and good value | The Fostering Network](#) and [Mockingbird Fostering Network Evaluation \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

The independent evaluation report published today by the Department for Education about The Fostering Network's award-winning Mockingbird programme found the programme to be a cost-effective, sustainable model of foster care, with more capacity to care for children and young people than other existing fostering models. Mockingbird is an innovative programme for foster care delivered by the UK's leading fostering charity The Fostering Network. It uses an intuitive model based on the structure, support and relationships of an extended family. There are several reasons for the programme's favourable return on investment figure, including savings due to children and young people spending fewer days in residential care and in the criminal justice system. The level of foster carer retention also contributed. The report found that those who participated in Mockingbird were 82% less likely to de-register than households who did not participate. A reason for this is the integral element of peer support for foster carers within the programme, 90% of whom rated it as good or excellent. This was further demonstrated in interviewees' responses describing the essence of Mockingbird as being 'an extended family', 'community', and 'person-centred'.

4. The independent review of children's social care Final report Josh McAlister May 2022 [Final Report - The Independent Review of Children's Social Care \(childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk\)](#)

This report clearly outlines the need for more local care for children in order to meet better outcomes and permanence planning. It acknowledges the social care market is broken and is not delivering the model of care required for our children. In amongst key recommendations is to 'grow your own' foster care sufficiency, both locally and regionally and this report outlines that growth.

5. Fostering Network: State of the Nations Foster Care 2021 [State of the Nation 2021 Thematic Report 1 Foster Carer Status.pdf \(thefosteringnetwork.org.uk\)](#)

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.

Term	Meaning
FCA	Foster Care Association
IFA	Independent Fostering Agency
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority
F & F	Friends and Family connected Carer