

Meeting: Corporate Parenting Panel
Date: 13 October 2014
Subject: Update report: Fees and Allowances for Foster Carers
Report of: Cllr Mark Versallion, Executive Member Children's Services
Summary: This report is an update in respect of the implementation of the Foster Carers' Fee Scheme which was introduced on 01 April 2014.

Advising Officer: Sue Harrison, Director of Children's Services
Contact Officer: Gerard Jones, Assistant Director Children's Services Operations
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Council

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

Central Bedfordshire Council's Strategic Plan 2012-16 Priority 3 – Promote health and wellbeing and protecting the vulnerable.

The Children and Young People's Plan 2011-2014 Priority 2 – Protecting children and keeping them safe.

Providing a sufficient number and range of foster placements is a key statutory responsibility to Looked After Children

Financial:

1. The Fostering Budget is £2,822,656 for 2014/15, with an additional £500,000 in place for the Fee Scheme

Legal:

2. The Children Act 1989 stipulates a statutory duty for local authority to provide sufficient accommodation in their local area and to provide maintenance for children who are looked after.
3. The Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011 and associated Statutory Guidance and National Minimum Standards outline the Council's responsibility to ensure that foster carers are given clear information about the allowances, fees and expenses available to them. The allowance must be sufficient to cover the cost of caring for a child placed with them and must be reviewed annually.

Risk Management:

4. Regulatory Risks: The provision of sufficient and suitable foster placements is a key activity monitored by Ofsted during inspection, forming part of their judgement about services for Looked After Children.
5. Child Protection Risks: Failure to recruit or retain sufficient foster carers would be a child protection risk.
6. Reputational Risk: Recruitment of foster carers is a competitive market activity and has a high media profile.
7. Financial Risk: Looked after Children placements is a demand led activity. Independent Agency Placements are high cost, and variations in the proportion of independent versus in-house placements can have significant and immediate impact on forecast spend.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

8. There are no current staffing issues in relation to the introduction of the fees scheme. Over the longer term, should there be a significant increase in the number of foster carers, it will be necessary to review the ratio of carers to staff.

Equalities/Human Rights:

9. Fostering allowances must meet the cost of caring for a child. The allowance scheme must ensure that any additional costs incurred in caring for a disabled child or a child with other specific needs is met. An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and to pay at least the basic recommended level of allowances meets the requirements of the assessment.

Community Safety:

10. There are no implications from these proposals.

Sustainability:

11. There are no implications from these proposals.

RECOMMENDATION:

- **To note progress on the implementation of the fostering fees scheme.**

Background

12. The Council has a duty to provide a range of placements for Looked After Children which meet their needs. In most cases a child's needs should be met by living in a family setting, either with someone known to them (known as a "friends and family" or connected person foster placement) or with foster carers.

13. The Council recruits its own foster carers, known as 'in-house' foster carers and also has the legal responsibility for assessing and approving friends and family foster carers. In order to meet the demand for foster placements and, in some cases, to meet specific needs of children, foster placements are also bought from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA). Central Bedfordshire Council, in conjunction with Luton Borough Council and Bedford Borough Council has a Framework Agreement with 18 such independent agencies to offer suitable and sufficient foster placements within a tight cost and quality framework.
14. A paper previously prepared by the Assistant Director Operations, for Executive (September 2013), set out a fee scheme with costing whereby foster carers would receive a tiered fee of £75 per week on top of the allowance paid to cover the cost of caring for a child. Once foster carers had completed their first year of caring and their Training, Support and Development (TSD) mandatory workforce development standards, the fee would then be increased to £150. Members agreed the proposed introduction of the fee scheme to enable Central Bedfordshire Council to remain competitive in the local fostering market. This was costed at £500k.
15. A review of the proposed Fee scheme took place in February 2014. As a result of this review and in order to improve our competitive position, the fees scheme was revised and agreed by members. The final fee agreed was £100 per week for tier 1 foster carers and £175 for tier 2 foster carers. The existing Youth Care Scheme would be retained and incorporated into tier 3 (no changes were made to fees for this scheme).
16. Benefits of the new Fee scheme
 - More competitive with neighbour local authorities and attract more carers
 - Prevent children going to IFA placements and bring those in IFA's back to in-house placements in a planned way
 - Incentivise foster carers to complete mandatory training and enable them to feel the Council is treating them as paid professional carers
 - Prevent loss of existing carers either to competitors or because carers can no longer afford to foster
 - Encourage foster carers who would otherwise need to work to be more available for fostering at no financial detriment to their household
 - Have carers more available to meet the needs of younger children, and potential savings on extra costs such as transport to school
 - Increase the provision of in-house placements and reduce the use of IFA placements by 25 by the end of March 2016.

Progress so far

17. The fees scheme came into place on 01 April 2014. The rebranding of the service and updated fees scheme could not be promoted fully until all the recruitment and marketing materials had the relevant information in them regarding the new fees scheme. This is now in place.

18. The assessment and approval process is complex and time consuming. Therefore, this has implications for how soon any potential foster carers may come through as a result of the fees scheme being introduced. The 2013 amended Children's Act 1969 reflects this with the timescales they set. This is as follows:

"A full assessment should be undertaken within a timescale which allows the fostering panel to make a recommendation on approval within eight months of the applicant first applying to be assessed"

19. The Fostering Service ensures that all assessments are completed and presented to panel within a six month timescale. If, therefore, prospective foster carers responded to the new fees scheme in April/May they would not be presented to panel until at least October/November 2014.

Recruitment activities since April 2014

20. With the introduction of the fees scheme all the fostering publicity materials were updated to include information to prospective foster carers about the fees scheme. All publicity, outreach events and adverts have used the introduction of the fees scheme as a means of promoting Central Bedfordshire as the preferred agency to foster for. The Fostering Service has 1 full time marketing and recruitment officer in post whose role has been to plan, co-ordinate and implement the recruitment strategy that the service has in place to recruit more foster carers. Set out below is the work that has taken place between April – July 2014 in an effort to recruit more in house foster carers.

21. Rebrand

- Fliers
- Posters
- Fostering and Adoption double sided postcards
- Pull out banners
- Display pod
- Display screen
- Flag
- T-shirts
- Balloons
- Pens
- Booklets
- Business cards

22. Since April 2014 the Fostering Teams have undertaken a wide variety of recruitment and marketing activities in order to recruit more foster carers as outlined below;

23. Outreach Work

- Pride in Houghton Day
- Flitwick indoor market x 2
- Asda, Biggleswade

- Leighton and Linslade May Fayre
- Corporate Parenting Launch
- Flitwick Carnival
- Armed Forces Day in Leighton Buzzard
- Waitrose, Ampthill
- Joint promotional event in Luton with other local authority fostering teams
- Wootton Family Fun Day
- Church End Lower School Fete, Marston Mortaine
- Party in the Park, Dunstable Asda, Dunstable

24. Advertising

- Leaflet drops in all Central Bedfordshire Council buildings, libraries and sports centres
- Leaflet drops in supermarkets
- News Central, Adoption advert
- Leaflet refresh in libraries and supermarkets

25. Press

- Staff Central – Article about fostering in general
- Article in Edwina Grant's newsletter x 2
- News Central – Interview with a foster carer
- Central Together Community E-zine – Interview with foster carer
- Staff Central – Corporate Parenting Launch write up
- Staff Central – Interview with Fostering Team Manager

26. Online

- Facebook campaign through main Central Bedfordshire Council Facebook page
- Launch of Fostering Facebook page
- Tweets during 15,000 kids and counting
- Online enquiry form on Facebook and Central Bedfordshire Council website
- Posts about outreach on Facebook x 2
- Facebook posts about Lorraine Pascale documentary about fostering
- Tweets Facebook posts about Lorraine Pascale documentary during the show

27. As a result of this recruitment drive the Fostering Teams have received 104 enquiries about fostering between April and July 2014 (compared to 62 for the same period last year when the service worked as a joint one with Bedford Borough).

April 2014	20 (14 in April 2013)
May 2014	45 (15 in May 2013)
June 2014	21 (15 in June 2013)
July 2014	18 (18 in July 2013)

28. Marketing activities that generated Initial Visits which then went through to Application stage were as follows:
- 1 applicant from Facebook
 - 1 application from CBC webpage
 - 1 application from outreach at Leighton Buzzard/ Linslade May
 - 1 applicant from a fostering booklet at a client's house
 - 2 applicants from the on line enquiry form
 - 2 applicants from word of mouth – foster carer
 - 2 applicants from word of mouth – staff
 - 2 applicants from I.F.A. carers wanting to transfer over
29. Within 1 day of receiving an enquiry prospective foster carers are sent an information pack about fostering. Fostering staff then make contact with prospective foster carers to arrange an initial visit which gives prospective foster carers the opportunity to discuss fostering in more depth, it also allows the fostering worker to make an initial assessment of the carers' capacity to foster.
30. Between April and July 2014, 42 Initial Visits were completed.
31. Following the Initial Visit, if the foster carers wish to proceed and are likely to meet the Fostering Regulations they are encouraged to complete an application form.
32. Once an application form is received the Fostering Teams can then allocate the assessment to a social worker to complete. The fostering regulations state that the assessment should be ready to be presented to panel within 8 months of the date of that the application form is received. The service aims to ensure that the majority of assessments are completed within 6 months.
33. Between April and July there were four mainstream foster carers approved by the foster panel. .
34. During April and July 2014 two mainstream foster carers had their approval terminated. Over the next 6 months it is likely that there will be at least three more fostering households who will be deregistered.
35. As of 31 July 2014 there are eight fostering assessments in progress. One is scheduled to be presented to the Fostering Panel in September 2014, two in October 2014, two in November 2014, one in December 2014 and two in January 2015. The four application forms we have received in August will be timetabled for panel in February 2015. This should provide the service with a total of 12 new fostering households. With the other application forms expected to be received and with the potential for further application forms to be received in September and October this will still allow us time to assess and approve more prospective foster carers before the end of March 2015.

Conclusion

36. The fees scheme was introduced in April 2014 and has been very successful in raising awareness and generating interest in fostering. It has enabled the service to be more competitive with neighbouring Local Authorities and IFA's. It has potentially prevented the loss of existing carers transferring to our competitors and encouraged carers from IFA's to transfer to Central Bedfordshire Council.
37. In terms of our existing carers a positive outcome is that there are currently 5 carers who are keen to increase the number of placements they can offer. Two of the carers who have been approved since April had previously worked and have since been able to give up employment in order to foster full time because the fees scheme has enabled them to be able to now afford to foster.
38. The Fostering Teams are committed to increasing the provision of in-house placements and reducing the use of IFA placements. The teams are in a good position to respond quickly to enquiries, initial visits and take on assessments when application forms are received. Strategies are in place to recruit external assessors should the service reach full capacity.
39. We are confident our numbers of in-house carers will continue to increase at a slow and steady pace rather than increasing our numbers significantly in the short timescale we have had thus far. The numbers of assessments currently in progress is encouraging as is the number of application forms already received. The aim is to build on this month by month so that we can meet the targets that have been set for the service.
40. Having reviewed our recruitment strategy the focus over the coming months is to target community groups through presentations and displaying leaflets and posters. We will be re-introducing information evenings with accompanying advertising and press coverage, both on line and in print media. More leaflet drops will be considered and social media and on line recruitment will be pursued more vigorously. We will also continue to promote and encourage our foster carers to introduce a friend to fostering as we know word of mouth can be one of the most successful ways to recruit foster carers.