

Fostering in West Berkshire

Committee considering report:	Scrutiny Commission
Date of Committee:	28 November 2023
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Heather Codling
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	19 October 2023
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1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To provide an oversight of the recruitment, remuneration and initiatives that are both taking place and planned with foster carers in West Berkshire.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 Members are recommended to consider the range of proposals outlined below, progressing with one or more with the intention that there will be an increase in the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	The financial impacts will depend on the options taken forward and the level of interest from foster carers. CFS is clear that foster care is the most cost-effective way to meet the needs of children in care, especially as the cost for care placements is high and escalating. Some specific costs are detailed within the report. West Berks have been successful in bidding for grant money in partnership with LA partners across the South East for Government funding to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
Human Resource:	The Supporting Foster Care Policy for Employees has been developed in collaboration with HR. This is a new HR policy that offers employees who foster additional paid leave of 5 days once recognised as a foster carer. The cost of implementing such an offer is minimal for employees as there are likely to be very few who are able to consider undertaking

	this role but will add value to being an employer of choice and also to improve the pool of potential applicants as foster carers.			
Legal:				
Risk Management:	The risks are primarily with not having enough foster carers to be able to provide care for children who need it, this carries a risk for the child, poor OfSTED inspection outcomes and financial risk with having to provide costly alternatives to foster care.			
Property:	Not applicable			
Policy:	There is legislation and national guidance covering the Local Authority duties in relation to foster carers, locally we have a Sufficiency Statement and a suite of policies that relate to foster care.			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?	X			

Environmental Impact:		X		
Health Impact:		X		
ICT Impact:		X		
Digital Services Impact:		X		
Council Strategy Priorities:	X			
Core Business:	X			<p>Ensure our vulnerable children and adults achieve better outcomes</p> <p>By providing local foster care placements we support better outcomes for children</p>
Data Impact:		X		
Consultation and Engagement:				

4 Executive Summary

4.1 When children are taken into the care of the Local Authority, the first preference when considering care arrangements is foster care, either through a connected person arrangement with extended family/friends who are assessed as foster carers, or through our ‘in house’ foster carers. There has been a sustained increase in the number of children coming into care locally and nationally whilst also a shortage of foster carers. West Berkshire therefore needs to increase the recruitment and training of foster carers, review the remuneration of carers and look at any other initiatives that may increase the provision of foster care in West Berkshire.

4.2 Proposals being considered:

- Creating a dedicated staff resource in CFS to provide a focus on foster care recruitment
- Introducing an Employee Supporting Foster Care Policy in West Berkshire Council
- Reviewing the remuneration, allowances and council tax for foster carers
- Expanding the Independent Fostering Agency market locally
- Taking part in a Regional Fostering Recruitment partnership

- 4.3 The outcomes for children in foster care tend to be better than for children living in residential care, the ability for children to grow up in a foster family tends to be far more positive, consistent and less stigmatising. The costs associated with foster care are significantly less than the costs associated with residential children's home. At the moment, the average cost of care in a children's home is £6,300 per week and we have 13 children in such placements, the weekly cost is £81,900, whereas Foster Care is £405 per week per child or £5,265 for the same group. Not all children in residential care could be placed in Foster Care, however, if four children were placed in foster care rather than residential, there would be an annual cost avoidance of over £1,200,000. There is significant merit for children and for the Local Authority to invest in the strengthening of the offer to recruit and retain foster carers for West Berkshire.

5 Supporting Information

- 5.1 Children and Family Services strongly believe that children and young people have the right to be brought up by their parents and within their families unless there is clear evidence that doing so is harmful to their overall wellbeing and development. Where possible, services should be provided to enable children to remain at home and when they have come into care in an emergency help them return home or to their extended family, however for some children it is not safe for them to remain at home and they have to be brought into the care of the Local Authority.
- 5.2 The Children's Act 1989 requires local authorities to ensure they secure and provide a range of sufficient accommodation that meets the varying needs of children in care. Section 22G of the Act requires local authorities to take strategic action in respect of those children they look after and for whom it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation within their local authority area. In those circumstances, section 22G requires local authorities, so far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for those children that meets their needs and is within their local authority area.
- 5.3 Studies undertaken by the Association of Directors of Children's Services over a 12 year period evidence increasing demands on children's social care nationally. Since 2021, demand has grown significantly in West Berkshire. The disruption to support services and household routines from Covid, economic pressures, a reduced service offer across some agencies and high-profile child abuse cases have all contributed to more 'front door' demand.
- 5.4 The numbers of children in need and subject to child protection plans have also risen from 143 in December 2021, to 342 in March 2023. There is a proven correlation between the rise in numbers of children on protection plans and a future rise in children in care. We should expect the number of children in care to rise during 2023.
- 5.5 Maintaining high quality care is challenging in the current environment, with a combination of rising demand, increased costs and a backdrop of a national shortage of places for children, therefore we are proposing a variety of initiatives that will increase the numbers of prospective foster carers in West Berkshire and retain those who are already foster carers.

Introduction

5.6 Recognising that there is a growing number of children coming into the care of the Local Authority, we are proposing a number of initiatives that seeks to increase the number of foster carers in West Berkshire.

Background

5.7 The recruiting of in-house foster carers remains a high priority, but this is in a climate of a highly competitive market, with Local Authorities and IFAs attempting to recruit and train new carers. There are documented studies in the fostering press of a shortage of foster carers nationally. In August 2022, Community Care reported that half of the nation's foster carers were considering quitting due to the cost of living crisis. This is compounded by there being less households with a spare bedroom as more bedrooms are used as home offices following Covid. There has been ongoing in advertising and promotion of fostering locally through a variety of forms of media

5.8 Our Strategy includes:

- To recruit a wide range of foster carers that can meet the needs of our children in care population using a variety of marketing initiatives.
- To provide a high-quality support service, supervision, and training to our current foster carers to ensure they feel valued and part of our fostering community.
- Events and activities to ensure foster carers feel valued and part of a successful team.
- Buddy and mentor scheme to support new and existing carers.
- Actively support the activities of West Berkshire Foster Care Association and regularly meet with them.

5.9 The Family Placement Team is responsible for foster carers and is made up of social workers, family support workers and business support who undertake a number of statutory functions which include:

- The recruitment, training and support of foster carers.
- Assessing, matching and supporting new placements for all children coming into care or existing children who require a new home.
- Completing a range of assessments including Form F's, Viability Assessments, Regulation 24, and Special Guardianship Order Assessments

5.10 Over the years, there have been changes to the team, one of those was the deletion of a post which had the sole focus on the recruitment of foster carers, the functions of this post has been spread out among the rest of the team to be completed alongside the other tasks associated with their roles.

5.11 West Berkshire Foster Carers received an increase in their allowances from April 1st 2023 of 3.5%, however the allowances that we are currently providing to our foster carers have not taken in account the recent "cost of living" rises that have been

experienced within society. There is a need to have a financial offer to foster carers that ensures we are competitive with neighbouring authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies in order for us to recruit and retain foster carers.

5.12 The table below outlines the different payment rates offered amongst our near neighbouring authorities. It is notable that Independent Fostering Agencies pay carers in excess to that paid by Local Authorities.

Fostering Agency	West Berkshire Council	Wokingham Borough Council	Hampshire County Council	(Reading Borough Council)	Swindon Borough Council	Bracknell Forest Council	Oxfordshire County Council
Standard Weekly Allowance for 16 – 18 years placement	£405	£402	£390	£425	£398	£416	£419

Proposals

5.13 **Supporting Foster Care Policy:** The Council is a large employer in West Berkshire and therefore would want to support our staff if they were to consider becoming foster carers, As a Council, we are committed to helping make a difference for foster carers and the children they care for in our local community, and improving the support for our employees who foster a child/children, enabling them to balance employment with looking after children.

5.14 This proposal would be to introduce a policy as a Fostering Friendly employer, we would offer foster carers flexible working and up to 5 additional days of paid time off for training per annum, settling a new child into their home and for ongoing responsibilities such as statutory case reviews and meetings with the case worker. The Personnel Committee has approved the Supporting Foster Care Policy. Once this policy is in place, we would seek to advocate for such policies to be introduced in other local businesses and organisations.

5.15 **Foster Care Recruitment:** it is proposed that the Local Authority seeks to appoint a Foster Care Recruitment post in the Family Placement Team. With the continued rise in the children in care population, it is proposed that a dedicated post focussing on the recruitment of foster carers is created, this post will be responsible for the practical promotion, advertising and recruitment activity associated with foster care recruitment.

5.16 A proposed job description and employee specification is included in the appendices. The post will need to be created and presented for evaluation, but we anticipate it is likely to be assessed at grade H, £30,151-£35,411 before oncosts. The recent regional fostering bid has been successful and will provide financial support that should cover the expenditure required to cover the post for 18 months.

5.17 **Remuneration and allowances for foster carers:** It is proposed that foster care allowances are increased from 1st April 2024, currently an uplift is planned for 3.5%,

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however to become more attractive an uplift of 5% or 10% could be considered. In addition, a number of other Local Authorities provide council tax exemption or reductions for foster carers as an incentive to become or continue as a foster carer.

<u>Fostering rate increase of 3.5%</u>				
	-	-	New Rate	Increase Value
	<u>Age From</u>	<u>To</u>		
	0	4	£243.54	£8.24
	5	10	£277.41	£9.38
	11	15	£402.92	£13.63
	16	18	£420.03	£14.20
<u>Fostering rate increase of 5%</u>				
	-	-	New Rate	Increase Value
	<u>Age From</u>	<u>To</u>		
	0	4	£247.07	£11.77
	5	10	£281.43	£13.40
	11	15	£408.75	£19.46
	16	18	£426.12	£20.29
<u>Fostering rate increase of 7.5%</u>				
	-	-	New Rate	Increase Value
	<u>Age From</u>	<u>To</u>		
	0	4	£252.95	£17.65
	5	10	£288.13	£20.10
	11	15	£418.49	£29.20
	16	18	£436.27	£30.44
<u>Fostering rate increase of 10%</u>				
	-	-	New Rate	Increase Value
	<u>Age From</u>	<u>To</u>		
	0	4	£258.83	£23.53
	5	10	£294.83	£26.80
	11	15	£428.22	£38.93
	16	18	£446.41	£40.58

5.18 Council Tax: In several Local Authorities, Fostering Households are exempt from paying Council Tax or have a reduction applied to the household. We currently have around 80 foster care households. Clearly some of these (particularly connected persons carers) will be paying a reduced council tax depending on their personal circumstances. If we were to give council tax exemption or reduction to all fostering households on the assumption that the average household would be in Band D costing £2,100, it is envisaged that this will carry a maximum financial pressure somewhere in the region of £150K if an exemption was applied to all the households, but graduated after that depending on the extent of the reduction applied.

- 5.19 **Regional Care Cooperatives:** West Berkshire Council is a member of the South Central Frameworks for both Independent Fostering Agencies and Residential Placements. This is a consortium of 14 Local Authorities established with the region to commission care from private providers, agreeing unified terms and conditions and negotiating placement costs for members. West Berkshire has been a member of the Frameworks since 2017. West Berkshire will continue to part of the regional frameworks as these are renegotiated over the coming years.
- 5.20 The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care in 2022 made strong statements on the way the market is not meeting current needs. Its key recommendation is that Local Authorities use their collective power to enhance the recruitment of foster carers through establishing new Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs). These RCCs will take on responsibility for the creation and running of all new public sector fostering in a region, as well as commissioning all not for-profit and private sector provided care for children as necessary.
- 5.21 It is suggested that the scale and specialist capabilities of RCCs will address the current weaknesses in the system and establish organisations able to transform the care system for the future. Local Authorities will have direct involvement in the running of RCCs, but to work they must be mandated rather than voluntary arrangements. Children will continue to be in the care of individual local authorities. West Berkshire has expressed our interest in being part of an RCC pilot in the South East of England, the bid was submitted in September and was confirmed to be successful in October for an 18 month pilot.
- 5.22 **Expanding the Independent Fostering Agency market locally:** Our provider of Supported Lodgings (Step By Step) is a registered charity and is in the process of setting up an IFA agency in addition to their supported lodgings scheme. They have had a registered manager in post for a number of months and are in the process of meeting the regulatory requirements with Ofsted. Their experience is with teenagers and young adults and they are hoping to convert some of their supported lodgings carers to foster carers. We have held a number of discussions with them about our needs and they are keen to work with us a ‘preferred partner’ given our long history of working well together. We are hoping to have our first matches for children in 2023.

6 Other options considered

This paper covers a variety of options some or all of which could be adopted, and varying degrees could be considered – the main aim of the proposals is to increase the recruitment of foster carers. It could be decided to do nothing and maintain the existing recruitment arrangements, however it is likely that we will fall short of the desired outcome to significantly increase the number of foster carers in West Berkshire.

7 Conclusion

Recruiting and retaining foster carers is a priority. They provide the most effective care for our vulnerable children, therefore ensuring that we have the correct environment and context to recruit them is vital. The proposals contained in this report provide opportunities for West Berkshire to develop our approach and increase the number of foster carers locally.

8 Appendices

Appendix A – Job Description

Appendix B – Supporting Foster Care Policy

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