

Summary Sheet

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Overview and Scrutiny Management Board – 25 October 2017

Report Title

The Implementation of the Revised Foster Carers Payments Scheme

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Ian Thomas, Strategic Director of Children and Young People's Services

Report Author(s)

Ian Walker, Head of Service

Ward(s) Affected

All

Executive Summary

The Foster Carers Payments Support and Development Scheme was revised 12 months ago with the specific aim of boosting the recruitment of foster carers in Rotherham and to reduce the increasing reliance on the Independent Fostering Agency sector (IFAs). Whilst the revised scheme has broadly been successfully implemented it has coincided with a significant increase in the overall numbers of looked after children (LAC) so that there has been little impact on the use of IFA placements. However, without this revised Scheme it may well be that recruitment will have been less successful and the financial implications arising from the increase in LAC numbers will have been even more significant.

Recommendations

1. That the contents of this report be noted.
2. That Members raise any suggestions or challenge they deem appropriate to further progress the developments within the service.

List of Appendices Included

None

Background Papers

None

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

No

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

The Implementation of the Revised Foster Carers Payments Scheme

1. Recommendations

1.1 The OSMB are recommended to note the contents of this report and to raise any suggestions or challenge they deem appropriate to further progress the developments within the service.

2. Background

2.1 During 2016, RMBC's Fostering & Adoption (F&A) Service identified that a lower proportion of its children in care were placed with RMBC Foster Carers than in the majority of other comparable local authorities. A shortage of available placements was causing children to be placed in residential homes and with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's) which, in addition to being a generally less satisfactory placement for the child, was a more expensive solution for RMBC.

2.2 The F&A service therefore concluded that a revised retention and recruitment incentive needed to be developed to create more placement opportunities within the Borough. This was to include a review not only of allowance payments but also of the level of training and support provided to new and existing carers. A six week consultation was undertaken in conjunction with a number of RMBC Foster Carers.

2.3 One element of this involved the benchmarking of a number of allowances paid to RMBC foster carers against those paid by comparable local authorities. This showed that RMBC carers received significantly less in a number of allowance types, but particularly so in respect of skills level allowances. In addition to this, the consultation undertaken with the foster carers indicated that they found the scope for progression through the allowance scheme including entitlement to any additional allowances to be confusing and something of a disincentive. As a result the Foster Carers Payment, Support and Development Policy was re-written with the objective of improving the recruitment and retention of foster carers in RMBC. Foster carers were consulted regularly throughout the process and were instrumental in designing the final model.

2.4 The findings of the consultation and recommendations for improving the offer to existing and prospective RMBC Foster Carers were ratified by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board (OSMB) on 2nd September 2016 when additional recommendations were also proposed. The policy was eventually approved by Cabinet on the 12th September 2017. The additional recommendations included the requirement for the Internal Audit team to review the implementation of the revised scheme to review whether:

- The revised foster care fees and allowances had been approved and accurately implemented.
- The implementation of enhanced support and training as part of the improved offer for Foster Carers was in delivery.
- The recruitment of additional foster carers was monitored and reported to establish the effectiveness of the revised scheme.

- Enquires as to the possibility of offering a Council Tax discount for RMBC foster carers, as per Commissioner Bradwell's recommendation, had been undertaken.
- Increased fees and allowances did not adversely affect carer's benefit payments, as per Commissioner Bradwell's recommendation.

3. Key Issues

- 3.1 As part of the approval process it was clarified that any increase in fees and allowances would in fact not adversely affect the foster carer's benefit payments. As yet there has been little progress in respect of securing Council Tax discounts for foster carers as the Corporate Parenting Panel stated that priority for such consideration should be given to care leavers. In fact Council Tax Exemption was only recently achieved for Care Leavers and so consideration can now be given to extending this to foster carers.
- 3.2 It was unfortunate that the implementation of the revised scheme coincided with the introduction of the Liquid Logic case file management system upon which the payments of allowances was dependent. Given the implementation of two new systems at the same time it would be fair to state that there was some state of confusion with numerous systems errors being made which, in turn, led to some carers not being paid. However, a manual payment system was quickly established as back-up and over the course of the first month the payment errors were gradually eradicated. A further issue has arisen in that payments are linked to the placement recorded on Liquid Logic and when a young person changes placement unless the allocated social worker updates the system in a timely manner then because only one carer can be paid for a child the new carer will experience a delay receiving payment whilst the previous carer will receive an overpayment that has to be repaid. However, a 'safety net' is now in place whereby the collocated Placements and Commissioning Team and Fostering Duty Social Worker monitor the updating of the system so that any under/over payments are more promptly addressed.
- 3.3 The revised scheme has now been in operation for approximately 12 months and it has been broadly welcomed by the fostering community. It appears that the revised scheme has had the desired positive impact on recruitment of new carers. Over the course of the past 12 months recruitment has been so successful that the target was stretched from 15 to 25 new foster families. Thus far in 2017/18 13 new foster families have been approved with a further 4 to be presented to Panel before the end of the year. There are also a further 8 assessments in progress meaning that the target of 25 is eminently attainable. The fact that two foster families have transferred from an Independent Foster Agency (IFA) would also suggest that the levels of financial support available are less of a disincentive that they used to be. In addition the retention of foster carers would appear to be less of a risk factor. There have been only 8 de-registrations over the course of the financial year due to:
- 3 retirements due to ill-health.
 - 1 carer moved too far from the RMBC area to make any future placement viable
 - 1 further retirement of a longstanding foster carer after a long-term placement moved to independence.

- 1 resignation but the carer had not provided any placements for 2 years
- 1 Connected Carer resignation following the young person being rehabilitated to the care of their parents.
- 1 resignation as CYPS did not agree to split siblings to enable the younger child to be placed on a permanent basis with the foster carers (permanence was later secured for them together).

Thus, of these 8 resignations only 4 of them had been providing any placements in the previous 12 months meaning the net impact was minimal.

3.4 Conversely over the course of the financial year 12 new foster families have already been approved with 4 further assessments booked onto Foster Panel for approval and a further 8 assessments currently ongoing. With a further 5 months to go it is possible that the team will reach their stretch target of 25 new foster families over the course of the year.

3.5 The Internal Audit Team have only recently audited the implementation of the revised scheme and on a scale from No Re-assurance to Partial Re-assurance, Reasonable Re-assurance and Substantial Re-assurance their overall opinion was that there was Reasonable Re-assurance regarding this process. The Audit Team also made the following recommendations for further action:-

- i) Better identification and recovery of foster allowance overpayments.
- ii) Closer controls around initiating and ending placements on Liquid Logic.
- iii) Address the lack of documentary evidence to support skills level allowance payments.
- iv) Monitoring of recruitment figures.

As stated above issues i) and ii) have largely been addressed by the closer monitoring of the Liquid Logic system updates. Furthermore, the monitoring of recruitment figures occurs at the fortnightly LAC Service Performance Clinic. The report presented by the Fostering Recruitment Team includes updates regarding approvals, deregistration's and the number of void placements currently being held to support foster carers to return to being active carers in a more timely manner. These void placements can be caused by ill-health, bereavement, safeguarding concerns, holidays or foster carers 'just wanting a break' after a particularly challenging placement. At present the conversion rate from initial enquiries to approvals remains at only 11%. As a result the Recruitment Team has also developed a 'Recruitment Pipeline' to better identify the most significant points of leakage in the process and as a result the team are reviewing how they respond to the initial enquiry as it appears too many people drop out at this point.

3.6 As a result of this performance management approach there are currently 217 in-house placements which is the highest number ever recorded in Rotherham. Unfortunately there has also been a substantial rise in the overall number of looked after children so that the number of IFA placements has also risen to 198. Future recruitment is likely to be boosted by a number of other initiatives including the Mockingbird Project, Refer a Friend Scheme, Time Off for Council

Employees who Foster or Adopt and the recruitment of a marketing officer to raise the social media profile and refine the process for Foster Carer recruitment.

4. Options Considered And Recommended Proposal

4.1 There are no options to consider in respect of this report and OSMB is recommended to consider the contents of the report and raise any challenge it deems appropriate to further the development of the service.

5. Consultation

5.1 The revised policy was written following full consultation with partner agencies and the foster carers themselves.

6. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

6.1 Not applicable as the decision has already been implemented.

7. Financial and Procurement Implications

7.1 Unless RMBC has a fit for purpose Foster Carer Payments Support and Development Scheme both the recruitment and the retention of foster carers is likely to be adversely affected. This in turn will increase the reliance on IFA placements which will present significant financial risks to the department.

8. Legal Implications

8.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

9. Human Resources Implications

9.1 There are no Human Resource implications arising from this report

10. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

10.1 A successful implementation of this policy will boost foster carer recruitment so that more looked after children will be able to access family based placements in the Rotherham area and thus be more likely to achieve positive outcomes.

11. Equalities and Human Rights Implications

11.1 Placing more looked after children with foster families will support their Human Rights and improve their life chances as research indicates that young people placed in family based settings are more likely to achieve good outcomes.

12. Implications for Partners and Other Directorates

12.1 The Out of Authority Placements budget including IFA and Residential placements presents the most significant pressure on effective budget management on CYPS and therefore RMBC as a whole.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 These risks are being mitigated by an effective implementation of the revised scheme and a more robust and comprehensive foster carer recruitment strategy which is supporting effective recruitment.

14. Accountable Officer(s)

Ian Walker – Head of Service

Approvals obtained on behalf of:-

	Named Officer	Date
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services	Mick Wildman	
Assistant Director of Legal Services	N/A	
Head of Procurement <i>(if appropriate)</i>	N/A	
Head of Human Resources <i>(if appropriate)</i>		

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