

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET EXECUTIVE

9th July 2019

**REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Rachel Powell
Portfolio Holder for Children's Services**

SUBJECT: Fostering Service Improvement

REPORT FOR: Information

1. Summary

- 1.1 The measures summarised in this report are intended to aid recruitment of foster carers and Supported Lodgings hosts in order that a greater number of Powys children looked after can be placed within Local Authority foster placements and Supported Lodgings arrangements, which are the most cost effective ways of providing high quality placements for these children. This supports the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 21 in particular and is consistent with the overall Improvement Plan and the Closer to Home work plan.
- 1.2 The creation of additional in-house fostering and Supported Lodgings capacity will enable children who are placed geographically outside of Powys to return to their home authority, and also will enable us to reduce our reliance on external providers whose costs are significantly greater than the cost of in-house provision.
- 1.3 The Fostering market is a very competitive environment, and we are competing against Independent Fostering Agencies (most of which are run for profit), and these agencies often offer higher financial reward to their foster carers than the Local Authority can. This report seeks to explain the measures being taken by the Powys Fostering Service which will enable Powys to compete more effectively with IFAs.

2. Proposal

- 2.1 At the time of writing, Powys has 41 children placed in Independent Fostering Agency placements. The cost of these vary but the average cost is £831 per week. 9 children are in IFA placements costing over £1000 per week. The total weekly spend on all IFA placements is £35,368. The average IFA cost is £831, and the cost if the child is placed with a Powys foster carer is £360 (a slightly rounded up figure). Thus the average savings for a child in an IFA

returning to a Powys foster carer is £471 per child per week, or £24,492 per child per year.

- 2.2 At the time of writing, Powys has 37 children placed in externally commissioned residential settings. The average weekly cost for these children is £3861.58. The most expensive residential placement that we commission is £5950 per week and we have two placements at that cost. The total weekly spend on residential placements is £142,878.30. The average residential cost is £3861, and the cost if the child is placed with a Powys foster carer is £360. Thus the average saving for a child in a residential unit returning to a Powys foster carer is £3501 per child per week or £182,052 per child per year.
- 2.3 Returning one child from a residential setting into a Powys foster placement will result in a saving of £182,052 per year.
- 2.4 Most of the children in IFA placements and some of the children in residential placements are placed there because we have insufficient Powys foster carers to provide all of the placements that we currently need.
- 2.5 Some children are placed in external residential placements for reasons that are linked to their care plan, as opposed to being for sufficiency reasons.
- 2.6 It is clear therefore that the improvement of processes that support the recruitment of foster carers and Supported Lodgings hosts is a critical issue, as this is the area where an effective service can increase capacity to better serve our looked after children and in so doing, result in cost avoidance for Children's Services.
- 2.7 Some children in IFA placements have been permanently matched to those foster carers, and these placements are intended to be their permanent placements until they reach adulthood. We are speaking to these carers in order to tell them about the service that Powys can provide to them if they were prepared to become Powys carers, rather than seeking to move those children into another placement in Powys. A foster carer can only be registered with one fostering agency at any one time. This could result in a significant cost reduction for those placements, as we will no longer have to pay the agency fee, which varies from approximately £450 to £800 per child per week.
- 2.8 Powys foster carers are paid £358.75 per week per child. When children return to a Powys carer from an IFA carer, the savings derive from the difference between the payment to the IFA, and the payment to the Powys foster carer. We wish to generate more enquiries from people who are interested in fostering, so that we can increase the number of children who can be looked after in Powys,

close to their family, friends and schools, where that is consistent with their needs and wishes.

- 2.9 In order to generate more fostering enquiries, the Powys Fostering website which provides information to prospective foster carers is now being managed within the Communications Team. The additional cost of this is £12,300pa which has now been factored into the budget. There will be Fostering and Supported Lodging recruitment activity operating in 6-8 week bursts, the first will culminate during Fostering Fortnight (13-26 May 2019). This activity will involve the use of Twitter and Facebook as well as the actual website itself. This will result in a marketing approach that is more attractive and functional, as well as wider reaching. There is a dedicated staff member who will take any and all calls resulting from this, and ensure that they are processed in a timely and effective way. This is a staff member who is already employed and there is no additional cost to this as the post is part of the staffing establishment.
- 2.10 Fostering Fortnight usually results in some media attention, and we will ensure that we have materials ready to put out that will inform and encourage people to consider fostering.
- 2.11 There is a Freephone number on the website for all fostering enquiries to be routed through to the service. This also has a Voicemail facility for out of hours calls.
- 2.12 The Fostering Service will initiate contact with people who have fostered for Powys in the past, and have done it well, to see if they would consider returning to foster for Powys.
- 2.13 The Fostering Service and Supported Lodgings marketing arrangements are also targeting employees of Powys and employees who may be about to leave Powys to see if they will consider a career in fostering or providing Supported Lodgings. The benefits and support that is available to carers will be clearly articulated to them.
- 2.14 For employees of Powys, the service aims to secure an additional annual leave allowance as part of the Local Authority's Corporate Parenting responsibilities, (5 days per annum pro rata) in order to better manage their fostering responsibilities. Where any staff recruited are 'frontline' staff, who would need to be replaced during any period of absence, Children's Services would like any additional costs arising from this to be absorbed by the Council as part of its Corporate Parenting responsibilities. It is not anticipated that this will be a significant cost, there may be one or two members of staff who are interested in fostering and who are subsequently approved for whom this would be an issue. Therefore, the cost would be for the provision of cover for an additional 10 working days (for 2 staff). In

the event that staff interested in fostering were not 'frontline' staff, then it is hoped that the relevant department would absorb this cost as part of its Corporate Parenting responsibility.

- 2.15 The Fostering Service is developing a Fostering Capacity Policy. This formalises a process whereby payments can be made in order to increase the capacity of a foster carer to look after more children (to a maximum of 3, or more if a sibling group), by making alterations to the house, or assisting a house move. This has happened in an ad hoc way in Powys up to now, but a clear policy will enable the process and agreements in relation to such issues being clear and streamlined, with fast, responsive decision making. This policy is not yet drafted and there is at this stage no identified budget for this. At the point at which we have developed a clear policy position and have a proposal as to how this will be funded, we will return the matter to Members for their consideration.
- 2.16 There is a Regional Fostering Website that went live on 31 January, and this therefore provides another gateway for potential applicants and interested parties. There is no cost to the Local Authority for this.
- 2.17 The Fostering Service staff have an understanding that recruitment and retention are key service priorities, and clear arrangements are being made to ensure that all fostering enquiries receive an initial visit from a qualified Social Worker very quickly after they make their enquiry, and that if suitable, the assessment and checks commence immediately after that. All Supported Lodgings enquiries will be routed through to the Supported Lodgings assessing staff for a prompt response and visit.
- 2.18 The numbers of enquiries and the initial visits that have been done are the subject of weekly oversight by fostering managers in order to ensure that matters are being progressed in a timely way. Managers are also looking with a critical eye at the stages in the assessment and approval processes to ensure that these processes are as simple and effective as they can be.
- 2.19 We have discussed with Swansea Local Authority in relation to the steps they took to improve their service and some of their measures are applicable in a Powys context and are being implemented here. These relate to changes in processes and systems, and there is no additional cost to these as they relate to existing staff doing some things differently.
- 2.20 Some re-organisation of responsibilities has happened in the Fostering team in order to ensure that initial visits are happening in a timely way, and standards are being set in terms of timescales for key tasks in the way in which Fostering applications are managed and allocated.

- 2.21 Welsh Government are implementing new Fostering Regulations at the end of April 2019. Managers are looking at the new regulations and ensuring that the service is compliant with these and making alterations where appropriate and required.
- 2.22 The national intent is that there will be a central national website and materials for Fostering recruitment for every Local Authority in Wales. This has been the subject of extensive market research and consideration, and is being managed by a professional agency. When this goes live (no date currently) the national website will link to each individual Local Authority, so that the contact and assessment happens locally. This national website is commissioned and funded by Welsh Government, and it is not anticipated that there will be any cost to individual Local Authorities.
- 2.23 In addition to this, the national intent is that there will be a harmonisation of fees paid to foster carers, across all Local Authorities. At the present time, the speed with which this will happen is not clear, though it is clearly a complex task with a great deal of sensitivity attached to it. This is being taken forward by a working group of fostering professionals nationally. It is possible that there will be an additional cost pressure arising from this, however, the view in the Powys Fostering Service is that this is unlikely. This is due to the fact that the current foster carer pay structure in Powys compares favourably to other Welsh Local Authorities, and the payments structure information has been sought from all Welsh Local Authorities in order for the harmonisation issue to be considered fully. In the event that this does result in an additional financial pressure in Powys, then this issue will be returned to Members for their consideration.
- 2.24 There had been a proposal put before Foster Carers some months ago in relation to an alteration of the fee structure for Powys carers. This was unpopular and had generated a great deal of concern among carers. This proposal has now been wholly withdrawn, and foster carers have been informed about this in a recent newsletter as well as in support groups and informal discussions with staff.
- 2.25 There has been considerable effort on the part of managers in recent months to ensure that foster carers feel listened to and their concerns are understood. Generally speaking, this has been well received by foster carers, and whilst progress has been slow in some instances, there is a general shift in a positive direction.
- 2.26 The Training offer for carers is being updated, and foster carers are being informed about what is available and when. The restructure has now resulted in there being two Team Managers in the Fostering Service, and this enables a division of over-arching broader responsibilities, one of which is training for Foster Carers. Every

Fostering Agency has a responsibility to train their foster carers, and the responsibility for organising the training for carers will be a responsibility given to one of the new Team Managers. In addition, our regional partners and ourselves will be co-ordinating this training within each Local Authority area, and for some Powys applicant carers, this could avoid the need for them having to travel some distance for this training. In relation to on-going mandatory training for foster carers, we hope to enable foster carers to attend the same training events as Social Workers and train alongside Social Workers where the training is relevant to the fostering task. It is not anticipated that this will give rise to any additional cost to the service overall.

2.27 Practice standards for the fostering team are being agreed and these represent improvement in the support provided to our foster carers and will ensure consistency of support across the fostering population. These set out expectations for all elements of practice from minimum response times to enquiries by prospective foster carers, to requirements for a carer's annual review. These will not give rise to additional cost, they relate to using existing resources in a slightly different way and providing clarity for Social Workers about the expectations of the service in relation to the Supervising Social Work function.

2.28 At the time of writing, we have 9 prospective fostering households in assessment and this is the best position that the service has been in for some time and we believe that this is attributable to the new arrangements, described here, that we have recently put in place.

2.29 It should be noted that at the present time, we have 19 'Schedule 3 carers'. These are people who in Powys have been fully approved as foster carers, but who only provide respite and support for one full time foster carer (who is connected to them in some way, usually a family member). In other Local Authorities, these 'support carers' are not approved as foster carers, and that is not a requirement in the fostering regulations. In Powys, the practice has been that they are fully approved. This means that they have a full fostering assessment, and have an allocated worker and all of the other supports and resource costs that go with being a full foster carer. We have now stopped doing this, as it is not a good use of our resources, and we are writing to each of the Schedule 3 carers to ask them if they want to foster children who are unconnected to the child(ren) placed with their associated foster carer, or whether they want to resign as foster carers. If they chose to resign as foster carers, they can continue to provide the support to their connected foster carer in the way that they always have. For this reason, it may be that some fostering resignations will come to Fostering Panel in the coming months. Equally, it may be that some of these carers can be 'converted' to mainstream foster carers who can take full time placements, which will require reassessment and attendance at

Panel.

- 2.30 Two new permanent Fostering Team Managers have now successfully been appointed within the Children's Services restructuring process, Matthew Brown and Melanie Brindle and they will be able to provide additional management capacity to drive the service forward.
- 2.31 In respect of Supported Lodgings (which are also being recruited for using the marketing arrangements outlined above), this is a provision for young people aged 16 and over. A Supported Lodgings host provides a room and meals in their own home for a young person, and these can be care leavers, or young people who have presented as being homeless and may then become looked after as a result. This is an area that is underdeveloped in Powys, and it is a very flexible and economical form of supported accommodation for young people. Hosts are assessed and supported by Powys staff, and the young person living with the host will generally have an allocated Social Worker and /or Leaving Care Personal Advisor. Supported Lodgings are not governed by any regulatory framework and this is a useful and flexible form of accommodation that we need to increase the supply and use of in Powys. An increase in the number of Supported Lodgings providers can result in savings when a looked after young person moves into a host family from a fostering placement.

3. Options Considered / Available

- 3.1 The changes that are outlined above have been and will be put into place in order to improve the recruitment of foster carers and Supported Lodgings hosts. These measures have no cost attached to them.
- 3.2 At the time of writing, we have 9 prospective fostering households in the Assessment process, and we are seeing an increase in the number of enquiries since the marketing has been done by the central Powys Communications Team. Later in the year we will be able to report on enquiry and application numbers and conversion rates to fully approved carers.
- 3.3 The fostering service aims to actively create savings by increasing the number of fostering and Supported Lodgings households in Powys, and it is believed that the adoption of the measures outlined here will enable the fostering service to make significant savings over the course of the next year.
- 3.4 In considering these measures, we have spoken to Swansea Fostering Service who achieved a notable improvement in their service, and significantly reduced the costs associated with providing

care for children. We have also drawn on the experience of staff currently working in Children's Services who have worked in the independent fostering service sector in order to address some of the process and system issues that have militated against the successful recruitment of foster carers in Powys.

- 3.5 Successfully increasing the number of Powys foster carers and Supported Lodgings hosts will bring benefits to the children themselves, of living closer to home, closer to school and closer to friends.

4. Preferred Choice and Reasons

- 4.1 It is recognised that financial remuneration is not the only thing that carers take into consideration when choosing which agency to foster with. Other important considerations include the level of support they receive and feeling valued by the organisation. These measures will send a clear message to foster carers and prospective foster carers that they are valued members of the Powys Children's Services team.

5. Impact Assessment

- 5.1 Is an impact assessment required? No
- 5.2 If yes is it attached? No

6. Corporate Improvement Plan

- 6.1 The proposals outlined here will result in savings to the Local Authority by ensuring that Powys children can live with Powys foster carers who provide a good quality of care at a reasonable cost. In addition, these proposals increase the prospect of Powys children being able to live in Powys, closer to their families and their friends and reducing the likelihood of a school move. This is entirely consistent with the Corporate Improvement Plan and the Children's Services Improvement Plan.

7. Local Member(s)

- 7.1 The Children Looked After population and the foster carer and Supported Lodging host population are drawn from all wards within the Local Authority. No single ward is affected any more than any other, and no ward is affected in a different way from the other wards.

8. Other Front Line Services

Does the recommendation impact on other services run by the Council or on behalf of the Council? No

If so please provide their comments

9. Communications

Have Communications seen a copy of this report? Yes

Communications have seen report and will support the campaign to recruit more foster carers.

Messages here are consistent with the campaign messages that fostering children closer to home is positive and that there is a need for foster carers of all types

10. Support Services (Legal, Finance, Corporate Property, HR, ICT, Business Services)

10.1 **Legal** – Legal Services support the report and the improvement plan, to assist children within our area

10.2 **Finance** – The Finance Manager notes the content of the report which is in line with the Improvement Plan and the Closer to Home work plan. If a placement for a child is changed and returned to a Powys Foster Carer there would be an average cost benefit of

- Independent Foster Agency (IFA) - £471 per child per week or £24,492 per child per year
- Residential placement - £3501 per child per week or £182,052 per child per year.

Following the Childrens recent restructure two permanent Fostering Team Managers have been successfully appointed, which will provide additional management capacity to drive the service forward. An additional cost of £12.300pa is being funded on a fixed term basis from the Social Workforce and Sustainability Welsh Government grant in 2019/20 to the Communications Team to manage the Powys Fostering website. On going, if required, will need to be funded from any efficiencies realised.

Further reports need to be brought to cabinet for decision and funding allocated within the existing financial envelope for

- An additional annual leave allowance as part of the Local Authority's Corporate Parenting responsibilities for employees of Powys who are

also Foster Carers

Developing a Fostering Capacity Policy, this formalises a process whereby payments can be made in order to increase the capacity of a foster carer to look after more children.

Service response: This proposal will be one way which can increase our corporate responsibility for our looked after children, The proposal is for the service in which the carer works to cover any cost incurred if the carer's work needs to be covered at additional cost for any the 5 days additional leave. Most leave will not need to be covered. It is likely only a small number of staff will become approved foster carers and yet fewer who would need the 5 days of foster carer leave to be covered at a financial cost. There are currently no foster carer / employees in this category.

10.3 **Corporate Property** (if appropriate) – none received

10.4 **HR** (if appropriate) – none received.

10.5 **ICT** (if appropriate) - I have read through the report and there are no implications for ICT and we support the proposal.

11. Scrutiny

Has this report been scrutinised? No

Due to the recommendations Health and Social Care Scrutiny Committee not required. Report has been considered by Senior Leadership Team.

12. Data Protection

If the proposal involves the processing of personal data then the Data Protection Officer must be consulted and their comments set out below.

Any and all fostering activity involves the processing of personal data both at the present time and if these proposals are accepted.

13. Statutory Officers

The Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes the comments of the Finance Manager.

The Solicitor to the Council (Monitoring Officer) commented as follows :
“ I note the legal comments and have nothing to add to the report.”

14. Members' Interests

The Monitoring Officer is not aware of any specific interests that may arise in relation to this report. If Members have an interest they should declare it at the start of the meeting and complete the relevant notification form.

Recommendation:	Reason for Recommendation:
<p>Members are invited to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Note the content of the report 2. Support the intention to increase the number and quality of Powys Foster Carers. 3. Support the intention to strengthen the Corporate Parenting responsibility across the council through mechanisms as described within the body of the report. 4. Approve the allocation of 5 days foster care leave per annum for Powys County Council Staff who are approved foster carers. 	<p>It is vital that the Council recognises the value of foster carers to the local authority, both in terms of the care they provide to some of our most vulnerable citizens and in terms of the financial implications to the authority where there are insufficient Powys foster carers.</p> <p>Provide recognition and tangible support to foster carers employed by the local authority for the important and indispensable role and range of tasks they undertake.</p>

Relevant Policy (ies):	
Within Policy:	Y
Within Budget:	N

Relevant Local Member(s):	
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Person(s) To Implement Decision:	
Date By When Decision To Be Implemented:	

Is a review of the impact of the decision required?	Y
If yes, date of review	August 2020
Person responsible for the review	Jan Coles
Date review to be presented to Portfolio Holder/ Cabinet for information or further action	

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Background Papers used to prepare Report: