

HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE & WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 11TH FEBRUARY 2014

SUBJECT: FOSTER CARER RETAINER PAYMENTS

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR SOCIAL SERVICES

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Scrutiny Members of the changes to the Foster Carer Retainer Payments policy (attached at Appendix 1) that are proposed to be implemented from 1st April 2014.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 It has long been custom and practice in Caerphilly for Foster Carers to be paid a retainer fee when they have placement vacancies. Although retainer payments are referred to in strategic documents, no formal policy has been in place and this clearly needed to be addressed.
- 2.2 In common with the majority of Local Authorities, there have been historical difficulties recruiting Foster Carers and within the context of a whole range of supports provided to Foster Carers, retainer payments can be an important contributing factor to encourage potential applications.
- 2.3 Over recent years the costs associated with retainer payments have escalated considerably. This has been as a consequence of increased recruitment of carers, improved retention and an increase in the number of 'career carers' coupled with an incremental reduction in the numbers of Looked After Children. In 2012/13 vacant placements resulting in retainer payments cost Children's Services £54k. This position clearly had to be reviewed.
- 2.4 The existing practice allowed Foster Carers to receive the following rates of payment for vacant placements:
- Probationary Carers £57 per week per placement
 - Mainstream Carers £68 per week per placement
 - Career Carers £176 per week per placement
- 2.5 The proposed policy will introduce a system where the criteria for retainer payments is more equitable for all carers, where payments will be time limited, will be open to review and where the payments will be stopped in certain circumstances. This will ensure that Caerphilly County Borough Council is comparative with other Local Authorities and with the independent foster care agencies.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention Strategy.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 All Foster carers who do not have a child in placement receive a retainer payment. As stated above this means that Probationary Carers i.e. within their first year of fostering receive £57 per week; Mainstream Carers receive £68 per week and Career Carers receive £176 per week.
- 4.2 The original proposal was to implement a flat rate of £60 per week to all carers for a maximum period of three months. This proposal was taken to Foster Carers for full consultation and as a consequence of these discussions the rates were amended to reflect the views of carers.
- 4.3 The policy proposes a new retainer payment rate of £110 for Career Carers per week – a reduction of £66 per week – and £55 rate per week for all other carers with no distinction made between Mainstream and Probationary Carers. These rates have been compared to the rates paid by neighbouring local authorities and independent foster care agencies and are competitive.
- 4.4 At present there is no time limit on the payment of a retainer whilst a foster carer has no child in placement. Foster carers can be without a placement for a number of months for a variety of reasons. Through the consultation exercise, Foster Carers themselves recognised that with such generous retainer payments and no time limit imposed, some carers may have no incentive to take placements. With the full support of Foster Carers, the policy introduces a maximum three month time period for retainer payments to be paid. Through the 4C's – the Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru, Caerphilly approved foster carer placements have been offered to other local authorities. It is anticipated that in future there will be significantly more cross boundary placements thus reducing the number and length of time retainer payments are made by maximising the use of Caerphilly approved foster carers.
- 4.5 A retainer payment is currently paid to all new Foster Carers from the date of their approval by the Fostering Panel until the date of their first placement. This policy recommends that no retainer payments are made until after the Foster Carer has had at their first full time placement.
- 4.6 It is further proposed to introduce a review mechanism whereby the Fostering Team Manager/ Service Manager will review Foster Carers in receipt of retainer payments on a monthly basis to determine and further explore the reasons why placements have not been made.
- 4.7 Undertaking this review has enabled the Fostering Team to review all Foster Carers and has resulted in a number of de-registrations of carers where their matching criteria, refusals to accept placements and continuing under occupancy issues have been addressed.
- 4.8 The service will continue to maximise placements and is confident that carers should not have placement vacancies for longer than the maximum three month period.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 An EIA screening has been completed in accordance with the Council's Strategic Equality Plan and supplementary guidance. No potential for unlawful discrimination and/or low level or minor negative impact has been identified, therefore a full EIA has not been carried out.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 As previously stated, during 2012/13 retainer payment fees totalled £54,487. There are currently 11 Foster Carers in receipt of a retainer payment: 2 are Probationary Carers, 4 are Mainstream Carers and 5 are Career Carers. Under the current arrangements this is costing £1,266 per week and with no time limit in place could potentially cost £65k for a full year. The same level of retainer payments under the new policy will cost £880 per week and with payments being made for a maximum of three months would cost a maximum of £10k. Introducing the revised policy will significantly reduce the spend on retainer payments.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Family Placement Social Workers and Caerphilly Approved Foster Carers are aware of the proposals contained within this report.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 Full consultation on the proposals contained within this report has taken place. All current Foster Carers were informed in writing of the proposals to introduce this policy and have had opportunity to respond to the proposals. As stated above, as a result of this consultation exercise and taking on board the responses received, the recommended retainer payment rate was increased to £110 for Career Carers and £55 for all other Carers. This has ensured that Caerphilly compares favourably with other local authorities and independent foster care agencies.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That Scrutiny Committee members note the content of this report and support the implementation of the policy from 1st April 2014.

10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 To create a more efficient system for retainer payments to foster carers.

11. STATUTORY POWERS

- 11.1 To ensure that the Council's statutory functions as a Registered Fostering Agency are fully met in accordance with legislation, statutory guidance and regulation.

Author: Stephanie Williams, Administration Manager
Gareth Jenkins, Assistant Director

Consultees: Social Services Senior Management Team
Cllr Robin Woodyatt, Cabinet Member Social Services
Children's Services Divisional Management Team
Caerphilly Approved Foster Carers
Sarah Skuse, Interim Team Manager, Family Placement Team
Lyndsey Hipsley, Interim Team Manager, Family Placement Team
Leasa Moore, Placements Officer
Georgine Butts, Finance Officer

Appendices:
Appendix 1 Foster Carer Retainer Payments Policy