

## Foster Carer Payments 2020/21

For the past six years, the annual pay increase for foster carers and Special Guardianship Order carers has been a 1% increase. Last year, a review of the rates of pay and the impact upon the recruitment and retention of foster carers was undertaken, and a 2% annual increase awarded. This was viewed very favourably by foster carers, saying that they felt valued and appreciated by this increased annual percentage and it also took into account the cost of living in line with the Corporate pay increase.

It remains very clear that pay and benefits still need to be enhanced, to become more competitive and to enable BwD to compete with neighbouring Authorities and Independent Agencies (IFA's), certainly in the current climate with Covid-19 and the impact of this upon recruitment. The IFA's are responding with targeted tactics to encourage Local Authority foster carers to transfer, with the offer of a higher allowance therefore the retention of foster carers is an additional challenge.

It is unfortunate that since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, two fostering households transferred to Independent Fostering Agencies and likewise there have been a number of potential fostering applicants who have expressed an interest in BwD, but have since decided to progress with their assessment with an IFA. The financial package does play a part in these decisions.

Our BwD recruitment strategies are constantly under review to remain visible and competitive, but it would be hugely beneficial to have a financial and supportive package that is comparable with other North West Authorities. A bus stop campaign in January 2020 focused specifically upon emphasising our support package, which includes Revive therapeutic support, corporate rate gym membership and holiday and birthday allowances. There were numerous registrations of interest from this campaign and this has just been relaunched again in October alongside billboards in the Borough to maintain a blended approach to both community visibility and digital campaigns. Virtual recruitment events are scheduled and our Heart Radio advertising has been successful at bringing in enquiries and applications. The conversion rate from enquires to approval is consistently a challenge, and this is a similar story in other Local Authorities locally and nationally.

### **Objectives for the Service:**

- to be competitive in the foster carer recruitment market
- to retain, develop and stretch the skills of our current carers
- To develop the offer of support which research cites as being of equal importance to prospective carers as the financial package
- to improve foster carer skills and resilience to ensure placement stability for all children and young people in foster care
- to ensure that as many children in our care are looked after in- house, close to home, and by well trained, skilled and supported foster carers
- to develop an annual plan for recruitment campaigns which are visible both in the community and on social media
- to recruit more emergency foster carers and short break carers to respond to demand

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly affected our recruitment of new fostering households, hence the proposal to strengthen and promote our existing offer for numerous reasons. To date there have been a comparable number of registrations of interest to last financial year, and given the state of play this is positive, suggesting that BwD is attractive to potential foster carers. It is however, a challenge when our geographical competition, Lancashire County Council, pays a higher rate than BwD and they are our direct competitors in terms of recruitment and retention. There is

no consistent pay offer across North West Authorities, or nationally, therefore establishing an attractive offer of both pay and support is paramount.

In November 2019, an Allocation and Tracking Panel was established to ensure tight timescales for the assessment of new applicants and robust oversight of new carers from the point of enquiry through to approval. This is to ensure that drift and delay does not lead to applicants transferring elsewhere.

In order to remain competitive in the recruitment market, and to support retention in the long term, a further percentage increase is requested for foster carers and SGO carers which mirrors last financial year with a 2% pay increase. It is necessary to point out that the offer to foster carers must be matched for SGO carers and they should not be at a financial detriment for applying for an SGO to achieve permanence. Both Legal and Government advice recommends and supports this view. This 2% increase has been factored into the 20/21 budget as an annual pay enhancement across all three fostering payments bands.

There will also be a separate paper submitted imminently which will outline a proposal to be considered for the 'Fostering Front Door' and our marketing objectives primarily around the fostering team staffing structure. This will look at addressing how BwD recruits fostering households and how family finding and matching is undertaken to utilise our own resources to the very best of our ability.

BwD Fostering have joined the DfE SEED funding consortium with Lancashire, Blackpool and Cumbria to bid for funding to research and develop our approach to commissioning and recruitment, and this also enables us to compare how our geographical neighbours are approaching fostering allowances and their recruitment campaigns.

**Proposals to be considered for approval:**

**Award all foster carers and SGO carers an additional percentage increase of 2% for 20/21**

Based on figures obtained from finance:

A 2% increase would be an additional £60,992 for fostering households, bands 1-3 from the fostering budget.

A 2% increase would be an additional £41,987 for Special Guardianship Carers from the SGO budget.

Total additional expenditure - £102,979 (based on expenditure in 2019/2020)

**Rationale:**

This paper has been amended to reflect a single option request of a 2% annual pay increase for all foster carers and Special Guardianship Carers for 2020-2021. As outlined, this percentage increase has been already factored into this year's budget and would replicate the pay increase for 2019-2020. Feedback from the Foster Carer Association has been that the 2% pay increase would be well received by our Foster Carers, and would generate a response of feeling valued and acknowledged for their hard work and commitment. This percentage option reflects an inflation increase request,

and would be promoted in terms of foster carer allowances as part of the overall recruitment drive. The Fostering Network promotes and campaigns for consistent, annual pay increases for foster carers to support recruitment, retention, and to support their standard of living, in order to best meet the needs of children and young people in our care.

Pamela Price  
Service Lead – Placements