

WIRRAL COUNCIL

REPORT TO CABINET: 20th September 2007

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

2007/08 FOSTERING, SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP, RESIDENCE ORDER AND ADOPTION ALLOWANCE FINANCIAL PAYMENTS - Update

Executive Summary

On 10th July 2007 a report was submitted for the consideration of members, which outlined the revised allowance rates for 2007 in regards to Fostering, Special Guardianship, Residence Order and Adoption payments in respect of the children placed with carers. The Report went on to outline the criteria and the progression criteria of Local Authority approved Foster Carers in regards to Fees within the Guide to Foster Carer Payments.

At the time of the original submission to Cabinet, the Wirral Foster Carers Association requested a final opportunity to consider the Guide to Foster Carer Payments, before further submission to Cabinet. The Department has subsequently met with the Association and has agreed to put forward for Cabinet's consideration, some alterations to the guide.

Wirral Foster Care Association have requested that Cabinet review their decision to start the new allowances from July 2007, and that this be back dated to April 2007.

1 Background

- 1.1 There has, in recent years been an increasing emphasis on the need to 'professionalise' foster care. This has been encouraged by the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services, which lay down clear requirements for the training and support of foster carers. Consideration was also given as to how Wirral might best progress a revised financial policy that will increase the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers in the face of local competition.
- 1.2 The report to Executive Board in June 2006 identified the introduction of fees as the most appropriate means to address these issues. It was agreed that fees would be payable to Foster Carers based on a banding scheme that relates the Foster Carers skills, experience and training.
- 1.3 Three Skills bands were created in addition to the existing schemes that would be termed Salaried Carers (because they are part of the Therapeutic, or Treatment Fostering Schemes). The existing Teenage Fostering Scheme would be assimilated into the Band 3 fostering fee over the next few years.

The agreed fees for each band are set out below:-

	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	“Salaried Carers”
Fee (per week)	£ 55.23	£ 82.81	£ 138.04	Current arrangements

All Foster Carers, offering the normal range of fostering services, were initially banded at Band 1 and payments were effective from 1st April 2006.

- 1.4 Progression through the Bands will be possible in 2007, subject to the Foster Carer being able to evidence they have the required skills. The numbers of places on each band would depend upon the number of Foster Carers required at each level by the Department informed by the Commissioning Strategy.
- 1.5 The advantages of such a payments structure are:
 - It enables us to compete more readily with the Independent Sector Fostering Agencies.
 - It supports the retention of existing, experienced Foster Carers, by putting in place a career structure.
 - It enables us to be very clear about what is expected of Foster Carers in each band.
 - It will enable us to increase placement choice for children and young people, thus preventing them from having to move too far away from their home locality.
- 1.6 On 10th July 2007 a report was submitted for consideration by members which outlined the revised allowance rates for 2007 in regards to Fostering, Special Guardianship, Residence Order and Adoption payments, in respect of the children placed with carers. The Report went on to outline the criteria and the progression criteria of Local Authority approved Foster Carers in regards to Fees within the Guide to Foster Carer Payments.
- 1.7 Since this submission, officers from the Council met with the Wirral Foster Carers Association on 20th July 2007, to consider the final proposed version of the Guide to Foster Carer Payments.
- 1.8 The agreed alterations are as follows:-
 - On Page 5 the following sentence be added “If a child receives EMA no deduction to the allowance will be made”.
 - On Page 10 the following sentence “and there is high demand for the type of care they are able to provide” be changed to “and there is sufficient demand for Band 3 carers”.

- On Page 13 the words “or holidays” be deleted.
 - On Page 13 Band 1 Criteria 1.05 stating that “The provision of a computer within the home that the foster child is able to access in order to develop their computer skills and complete homework as required by the school curriculum be moved to Band 2 criteria and be replaced by the criteria “Provide access to a computer”. In Band 1 and Band 2 arrangements should be made to ensure that the child cannot access inappropriate material via the computer and is appropriately supervised.
- 1.9 In addition to these changes to the guide the Wirral Foster Care Association, through their spokesperson, Mr Bill Shackleton, have requested that Cabinet review their decision to start the new allowances from July 2007 and that this be back dated to April.

2 Financial Implications

- 2.1 The backdating of the increase in allowances from July to April 2007 would incur additional spend of £24,000 in 2007/8 that is not included in the financial projections. There are no further financial implications associated with the proposed changes to the Guide to Foster Carer payments reported to Cabinet on 10th July 2007.
- 2.2 Financial pressures have lessened since the 10th July report to cabinet, the projected overspend has reduced from 1.9 million to 1.28 million. This would allow the payment of these back dated payments, although this budget area is still predicted to overspend.

3 Staffing Implications

- 3.1 None.

4 Equal Opportunities Implications

- 4.1 Foster care is available to all children/young people subject to an assessment that it is the most appropriate way of meeting their needs.
- 4.2 Foster carers, Special Guardian’s and Adopters are recruited from all sectors of the community.

5 Community Safety Implications

- 5.1 The aim of providing secure and stable foster placements to children/young people who need to be “Looked After” by the Local Authority is consistent with the aims of reducing offending and diverting young people from anti social behaviour.

6 Local Agenda 21 Implications

- 6.1 None.

7 Planning Implications

- 7.1 None.

8 Anti Poverty Implications

- 8.1 The introduction of a Fee scheme based on a foster carer's skills will provide opportunities for those on benefits or low incomes to use their caring skills to remove themselves from poverty.

9 Social inclusion implications

- 9.1 The foster care service is committed to challenging the social exclusion experienced by "Looked After" children.
- 9.2 The increased development of a range of locally based foster care placements reduces travel by parents, carers and social workers.

10 Local Member Support implications

- 10.1 Children/young people placed with foster carers come from all Wards on the Wirral.
- 10.2 Foster carers, Special Guardians and Adopters live in all Wards on the Wirral.

11 Background Papers

- 11.1 Report to Executive Board 19th June 2006, Reports to Cabinet 10TH July 2007, 15th November 2006 and 21st April 2004.
- 11.2 The Cost of Foster Care: Investing in children's futures, Robert Tapsfield & Felicity Collier, The Fostering Network 2005.

Recommendations

That

- (1) the proposed Guide to Foster Carer Payments, including amendments agreed with members of the Wirral Foster Care Association be agreed by Cabinet; and
- (2) Cabinet consider the Wirral Foster Care Association request that the increase in allowances should be backdated from July 2007 to April 2007.

**Howard Cooper
Director of Children's Services**