

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO CABINET

19 JULY 2022

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR – SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING

FOSTER CARER ALLOWANCES UPLIFT

1. Purpose of report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide Cabinet with analysis to support a proposed increase to foster carer allowances, linked to the significant increases to the cost of living.
- Seek agreement from Cabinet in respect of the proposals to offer all foster carers two weeks paid respite per annum, and increase foster carer allowance for 2022/23.

2. Connection to corporate well-being objectives/other corporate priorities

2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objective/objectives under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:

- **Supporting a successful sustainable economy** – taking steps to make the county borough a great place to do business, for people to live, work, study and visit, and to ensure that our schools are focussed on raising the skills, qualifications and ambitions for all people in the county borough.
- **Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient** - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.
- **Smarter use of resources** – ensure that all resources (financial, physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of resources throughout the community that can help to deliver the Council's well-being objectives.

3. Background

3.1 Foster Carers play a significant role for the Council, providing care within a family to children and young people who cannot live at home with their birth families. Care experienced children will often have experienced significant trauma and have additional needs requiring very skilled and experienced parenting and support.

- 3.2 Wales, and other parts of the UK, experience challenges in ensuring there is a sufficient number of foster carers to meet needs. There are not enough foster carers and one of the “key themes” identified within the Placement Commissioning Strategy completed in April 2021 was an insufficient number of in- house foster carers.
- 3.3 To address this area of concern Bridgend has engaged with regional colleagues to support recruitment of foster carers. In April 2022 BCBC entered into a Regional Front Door with Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr County Borough Councils to support one point of contact for all foster carer enquiries and initial visits.
- 3.4 In September 2021 we saw the official launch of Maethu Cymru/Foster Wales to support a national approach to the recruitment of new foster carers across all 22 Local Authorities in Wales. The impact of this to date has been limited, with a significant reduction in new carers being assessed by Bridgend Fostering Service between 2020/21 – 2021/22.

Year	No of Assessments Commenced
2019/20	22
2020/21	21
2021/22	27
2022/23 (To Date)	12

- 3.5 In 2012 the Welsh Government set out its National Minimum Allowances for Foster Carers in Wales to meet the day-to-day costs of looking after a child who was accommodated by the Local Authority, and Bridgend Fostering Service pay foster carers in line with the allowances set out within this document. The amount foster carers receive each year has increased minimally in line with the agreed inflation rates during this period of time.
- 3.6 These minimum allowances were last updated in 2020/21, for a three-year cycle, and means the foster carer allowances this year rise by 3%.
- 3.7 In addition to the Basic Allowance, all of Bridgend Fostering Service’s general foster carers receive an additional allowance (formerly fee) recognizing the skills, knowledge and professional development required to fulfill their role. This is now available to all foster carers including Connected Persons if they meet the Eligibility Criteria set out in the Fostering Finances Policy adopted in March 2022.
- 3.8 There has been no increase to this Additional Allowance since 2012. However, in 2019 as part of the re-modelling of Bridgend’s Fostering Services there was a change to the stage in a Foster Carers “career” where they would be entitled to receive an additional allowance in order to support foster carer recruitment and retention.

3.9 Alongside these developments, the National Fostering Framework has for many years sought to achieve a “harmonisation” of fostering allowances paid across Wales, work which, due to the complexities involved, continues at the present time under the banner of Maethu Cymru/Foster Wales.

4. Current situation/proposal

4.1 As stated above Bridgend Fostering Service need to recruit new foster carers, whilst retaining those we have currently, in order to ensure that we can achieve sufficiency of placements to safeguard children and young people. Local Authorities are required statutorily to ensure sufficient supply of regulated care services – a Market Stability Report is progressing to July Council which identifies a deficit in the number of foster carers in Bridgend, and the rest of the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region.

4.2 Foster Carers in Bridgend have received an increase to their basic allowance this year of 3%, whereas the cost of living is anticipated to rise by 10% over coming months.

4.3 The Fostering Service is committed to consulting and engaging with carers in order to identify key issues for them that need to be considered by the service. In March 2022 a questionnaire was developed collaboratively by the service and Liaison Foster Carers which was sent out to all foster carers. Fifty-seven responses were received which represents 38% of our total foster carer numbers. The key themes identified within the feedback can be broken down as follows:

- a) Communication
- b) Support
- c) Training and Development
- d) Allowances

4.4 Within all aspects of the questionnaire responses, a recurring theme was Foster Carer Allowances and demonstrated significant anger and anxieties regarding the proposed 3% increase to allowances (National Minimum Allowances) and the high cost of living. Some of the comments received in relation to allowances are noted below and it is important to note that the NFF (National Fostering Framework) have raised the need for a review of these allowances with Welsh Government:

- *It would be nice if the fostering team would push for a pay raise for us Foster Carers as it pays very little for a job that's a very hard 24hr, 7 day a week job. There is no incentive.*
- *I feel lots of carers go to private agencies as there has been no rise in payments in around 18 years. Who else would work for a company that doesn't appreciate the hard work of fostering?*

- *No holiday allowance, no paid respite, no birthday allowance, no Christmas allowance.*
- *Allowances and foster carer fees. Inflation affects foster carers too. There's not enough of a rise to compensate, look at the rise of fuel, gas and electricity. We don't get a minimum wage, we don't get holidays, we don't get sick pay. If you value your carers take this seriously or you'll end up losing them all to IFA's.*

4.5 Across Wales there is again a varied approach being taken in respect of this issue with some Local Authorities making the decision to offer Foster Carers a one-off additional payment, an approach adopted by BCBC in December 2021 when all Foster Carers received a one-off financial payment of £500, supported by the Recovery Fund. One other Local Authority within the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region (RCT) is exploring the option of increasing Fostering Allowances over and above the National Minimum Allowances, as well as Local Authorities in North Wales.

4.6 The role of the foster carer takes place 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. At the present time any carer who wishes to take a short break, akin to a period of annual leave would receive no allowances during this period. It is clear from the foster carer survey results this leaves carers with a sense of dissatisfaction.

4.7 The proposal for consideration, therefore, is twofold. Firstly, to increase the Fostering Allowances by 7% (in addition to the 3% already paid) to 10% for 2022/23 only, pending any recommendations from Welsh Government or further review by the service that may be undertaken in relation to changes of circumstance. The Council will need to consider any continuation of this increase beyond this financial year in its budget setting for 2023/24 onwards. Secondly, to consider the proposal to offer all foster carers two weeks (14 days) paid respite per annum.

4.8 Regional Partners

Table 1

L A M E R R C T B C B C	Weekly Child Allowances				Weekly Additional Allowances				Annual Additional Payments			
	0-4	5-10	11-15	16+	Lowest	Fee 2	Fee 3	Highest	Christmas	Birthday	Holiday	Other
	£194	£177	£182	£220	£65			£160	£364	£182	£364	
	£194	£177	£177	£220	£181			£181				£1000
	£194	£177	£224.37	£224.37	£74.48	£94.77	£148.88	£189.61				

Table 1 illustrates that Cwm Taf Morgannwg partners pay additional payments to foster carers over the course of any year. This means, an additional £1000 is paid in RCT and an additional £910 in Merthyr by virtue of additional allowances, for which no equivalent is offered by Bridgend Fostering Service. In addition to this it is noteworthy that the highest amount of BCBC additional allowance (£189.61) is only received by foster carers who are 'level 3' and care for children aged 11+ (only 74 payments of £189.61 being made in March 2022). Therefore, comparatively RCT pay their foster carers a significantly higher amount of additional weekly allowance per placement, paying a standard additional allowance of £181 for each placement.

4.9 Nationally, BCBC is among 4 out of the 22 local authorities who offer no additional payments to foster carers aside from allowances. It can be a challenge to benchmark a local authority against fellow local authorities owing to differences in administration between some offering 1 rate of additional allowance, some paying above recommended minimum allowances and some making additional payments. As an attempt to provide an indication as to where BCBC sits in comparison to the 21 other Local Authorities in respect of the figures in table 2 below, the green column entitled 'Total Fig*' are the total amounts of all allowances and additional payments added together, and displayed in increasing order of amounts. The right-hand column is the total of the highest additional allowance plus additional payments, not including standard allowances. In both, BCBC's total is highlighted in yellow and demonstrates in both cases how BCBC is one of the 3 lowest paying of the 22 local authorities in Wales.

Table 2

LA	Total Fig*	Highest+Lowest+additional payment
MCC	£206	£140
BGCBC	£400	£200
BCBC	£508	£264
TCBC	£634	£308
NCC	£647	£550
VOG	£720	£634
CARMS	£790	£701
WREX	£791	£709
CER	£901	£710
GWYN	£1,002	£764
NPT	£1,029	£802
SWAN	£1,041	£880
DEB	£1,085	£952
MER	£1,135	£986
CCBC	£1,155	£988
PEM	£1,197	£1,090
CARD	£1,235	£1,135

RCT	£1,362	£1,191
YM	£1,374	£1,235
POWYS	£1,480	£1,289
FLINT	£1,546	£1,362
CON	£1,822	£1,480

4.10 In addition to the above comparative analysis, all 22 Local Authorities in Wales were contacted regarding whether they provide payment to foster carers when they are receiving respite. 20 Local Authorities were able to provide this information and of these, Bridgend is one of 4 Local Authorities who provide no payment to a foster carer whilst they have respite, however 2 of the 4 provide Christmas, birthday and holiday allowances whilst BCBC and one remaining local authority do not.

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

5.1 The Fostering Financial Policy dated February 2022 will need to be reviewed and updated should cabinet agree with the proposal contained within this report.

6. Equality Act 2010 implications

6.1 An initial EIA screening has identified that there would be no negative impact on those with one or more of the protected characteristics, on socio-economic disadvantage or the use of the Welsh language. It is therefore not necessary to carry out a full EIA on this policy or proposal.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

7.1 The implementation of the duties and responsibilities under the Social Services and Wellbeing Act (Wales) (SSWBA) 2014, in turn, supports the promotion of two of the seven goals of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 within the County Borough of Bridgend. By promoting an environment that maximises people's physical and mental well-being and by supporting children, young people, adults and their carers and families to fulfil their potential no matter what their circumstances, the wellbeing goals of a healthier and more equal Bridgend and Wales are supported.

7.2 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides the basis for driving a different kind of public service in Wales, with five ways of working to guide how the Authority should work to deliver wellbeing outcomes for people. The following is a summary to show how the five ways of working to achieve the well-being goals have been considered in this report:

- **Long term:** The fostering service continues to actively recruit new foster carers in order to be able to meet the needs of the current and future looked after children population. The proposal within this would also serve to enable the Fostering Service to retain foster carers by demonstrating our commitment to provide them with a high level of support.

- **Prevention and Integration** – As noted within this report having a sufficient number of foster care placements available for children who cannot continue to live at home with their family is a significant challenge across Wales. There is significant work taking place as part of Maethu Cymru/Foster Wales around both recruitment and retention in recognition of the size of the challenge. The proposal in this report would support BCBC’s attempts to retain the Foster Carers we currently have, thereby preventing further reduction in the number of placements that are available, by acknowledging the resilience and dedication shown by our foster carers throughout the pandemic and demonstrating that they are a valued part of the wider social care team. The adult placement scheme provides a very cost effective way of supporting adults avoiding much more costly residential or supported living placements. The scheme is designed to enable people to live in a local community and participate in community life.
- **Collaboration and Involvement** – The body of the report above demonstrates the commitment Bridgend Fostering Service has to collaborate with and involve foster carers in the preparation of the Service Development Plan, recognising their professionalism, skills and knowledge.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 Currently the highest amount a BCBC Foster Carer receives for a single placement is £21,774 per annum whereas the average cost of a placement with an IFA would be £46,774. Therefore, for every child we place with a BCBC Foster Carer the Local Authority saves approximately £25,000 a year.
- 8.2 The proposed additional 7% to the fostering allowances, will see an increase to the budget of £201,000 (3% inflation uplift and additional requested 7%). The proposal is for 2022/23 at this stage and any increases beyond this financial year will need to be considered as part of the Council’s budget setting for 2023/24 onwards, as part of Medium Term Financial Strategy considerations. However, this will provide the carers with an increase that will match the significant costs pressure they face due to the rise in cost of living at present.
- 8.3 For the increased cost of foster carer allowances we are seeking agreement for this to be funded from the Social Care Workforce Grant which has been received annually for the last 5 years. In 2022/23 this grant is £2 million and is used flexibly to reflect pressures across volatile social care budgets. It is clear that there is a risk of attrition if BCBC does not address this matter, and it is also a barrier to foster carer recruitment.
- 8.4 The proposal to introduce two weeks paid respite for all foster carers would cost the Local Authority £80,186. It is proposed that this is funded from the in-house fostering allowances budget. This is affordable within the current budget.
- 8.5 WG has allocated BCBC £44,749 this year as part of their Cost of Living package to support families who are caring for some of our most vulnerable children. These could

include both kinship and mainstream foster carers, special guardians, children placed with parents, and adoptive families, who are experiencing difficulties due to the cost of living increases and it is proposed that this money could be used to offset the increase in budget in 2022/23 if the proposal is agreed.

9. Recommendation(s)

9.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:

- Approve the proposal to offer all foster carers two weeks paid respite per annum, financed as indicated from within existing budget.
- Approve the proposal to increase foster carer allowances as set out in 8.2 of this report.

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Background documents:

None