



Title of meeting: Cabinet Member Meeting Children, Families and Education

Date of meeting: 22nd February 2024

Subject: Carers' Fees and Allowances Policy for Portsmouth 2024-25

Report by: Mark Jowett, Head of Service, Children We Care For

Cabinet Member: Councillor Suzy Horton, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education

Wards affected: All

Key decision: Yes/No

Full Council decision: Yes/No

1. Purpose of report

1.1 The purpose of the report is to:

1.2 Inform the Cabinet Member of the Carers' Fees and Allowances Policy for Portsmouth 2024-25 as seen in Appendix A, and to seek approval for the proposed financial increases to the Foster Carers Fees and Allowances.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet Member:

2.2 Approve the proposal to change the payment structure and increase the Skills Fees for Foster Carers and related Allowances. It is proposed that that this updated policy takes effect from 7th April 2024.

2.3 Agree that delegated authority is with the Deputy Director, Children & Families (in conjunction with the Section 151 Officer) to approve an annual uplift to the standard fostering allowance in line with the national minimum guidance. This will include the following which are linked to the standard fostering allowance:

- Birthday & Religious Festival Allowance;
- Foster Carers Leave;
- Family Link; and
- Activities Allowance

3. Background

National Context

- 3.1 Nationally foster carer shortages are deepening in England with one in eight fostering households having quit, and more leaving than joining. Ofsted's most recent fostering statistics showed that in 2021-22, 5,435 mainstream fostering households deregistered compared to 4,035 previously, that were approved to care and still active as of 31st March 2022. Those deregistering represented 13% of all those who had been approved during 2021-22.
- 3.2 This was combined with 2021-22 seeing the lowest number of applications to foster in several years, at 8,280. The number of newly approved mainstream households still active as of 31st March 2022 was 18% lower than in 2018, while there were 4% fewer such households, and 5% fewer available places for children, than four years prior. Ofsted's National Director for Social Care Yvette Stanley warned the sector would reach "breaking point"¹ if more carers were not recruited.
- 3.3 In its final report², published in May 2022, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care urged the government to recruit 9,000 more foster carers over the next three years, to tackle "an immediate and pressing shortage". Since then, charities have warned that retention problems are getting worse due to the cost-of-living crisis. Fostering Network research³ published in May 2023 raised similar concerns about the impact of rising prices on carers' ability to continue in their role.

Local context

- 3.4 Portsmouth has a strong and thriving fostering community and has been able to recruit and retain foster carers consistently, and we want to continue to support this. As at 31/03/23, Portsmouth had 225 fostering households, with 283 (73%) children in our care living with our own fostering family households.
- 3.5 In May 2023, Ofsted completed an inspection of Portsmouth's Children's Services which was judged as 'good'. The inspection included the fostering service which was highlighted as a strength. In summary, the report highlighted that children coming into care benefited from effective foster carers and stable homes.
- 3.6 Since 2021, the Mockingbird model of care has boosted foster care retention and grown to five constellations (ten fostering households per constellation). The approach has received excellent feedback from carers, children and social workers, who appreciate the strong relationships that have formed where mutual support is valued.

¹ Ofsted press release: Lack of foster carers mean children missing out on support (November 2021)

² Josh MacAlister, Independent Review of Children's Social Care (May 2022)

³ Centre for Evidence and Implementation, Foster carer retention and recruitment in England. A research report for The Fostering Network (May 2023)



3.7 Whilst the foster carers of Portsmouth provide high quality care and support, there is worry from some Portsmouth foster carers who do not feel that they receive sufficient financial recompense for the increasingly complex work that they do.

4. Reasons for recommendations

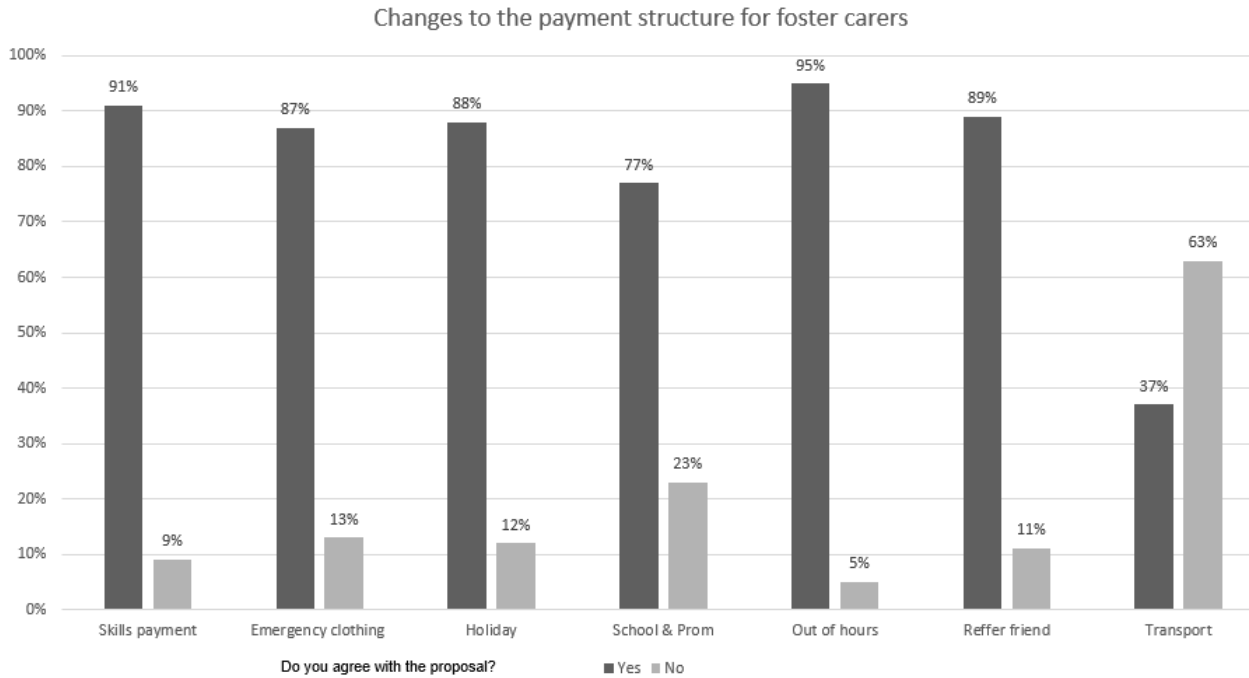
4.1 Having reviewed Portsmouth's foster carers allowances and skills and considered other local authorities' payments, several financial increases are proposed costing a total of £535,000 per annum.

Fee or Allowance	Estimated Annual Cost Increase £
Skills Fees	325,000
Emergency Clothing	4,000
School Uniform/Prom Outfit	5,000
Holiday Allowance	80,000
Out of Hours Carers	48,000
Day time Only Foster Care	1,000
Supported Lodgings	79,000
Staying Put	48,000
Refer a friend	5,000
Respite	(36,000)
Travel	(24,000)
Total	535,000

Consultation

4.2 To inform the key changes made to the policy, the Foster Carers Liaison Group were consulted with, and a survey was sent out to all foster carers⁴. Feedback in relation to the changes was generally very positive, though proposed changes to expenses relating to an increase in the travel threshold (see 4.17) received varied views. Some foster carers (37%) were of the view that this would not be an issue as they did not often need to transport children in their care and/or did not see the need to make additional travel claims. 63% of foster carers did not agree with the proposal, noting that the cost of fuel was high (and at times over the year had been even higher), and that some foster carers were required to transport children long distances, whilst some did not need to travel at all. For those foster carers experiencing high mileage this was felt to be unfair.

⁴ 82 responses (35% of foster carers as at 12/12/23)



Key changes to the policy (see policy for detail, appendix A)

4.3 Overall, the majority of proposed key changes have been positively received and will benefit carers. To enable the significant investment in key areas and make the proposal affordable some savings have been made, with changes to respite care which will provide fairness and equity, and to travel which will bring Portsmouth in line with other local authorities.

Exceptional Payments

4.4 It is acknowledged that there may be occasions where exceptional payments are made under circumstances that are not fully covered by the policy. Requests for exceptional payments will be considered and agreed at a new monthly Supporting Children & Carers' Panel, chaired by the Head of Service for Children We Care For. This will ensure a more consistent approach to considering such requests and provide an audit trail which will then help inform future reviews of the policy.

Skills Fees

4.5 The skills fee is paid weekly to the foster carer (in addition to the weekly fostering allowance) once they have been approved at the fostering panel. As the foster carer progresses in skills and training, they have the opportunity of moving up a skill level. The current skills fee structure is overly complex and has a pay differential, dependent on the age of the child that is being cared for. The recommended skills fee simplifies the current payment structure and brings the offer and approach more in line with neighbouring local authorities.

Emergency Clothing

- 4.6 Occasionally, a child will come into foster care without adequate clothing. There was previously an initial clothing allowance with immediate payments of up to £50.00 if required. The previous amount is insufficient in some circumstances and so the maximum amount that can be claimed has been increased, with the allowance greater for older children (11-17 years old).

Holiday Allowance

- 4.7 The previous allowance was a discretionary payment per child per financial year and required the foster carer to request it. The recommendation is that the allowance is no longer discretionary, and it will now be available to all children we care for.

Family/Friends Relief Carers

Currently, if a foster carer wishes to ask a friend or family member to care for a foster child whilst they are away for a few days, the friend/family member needs to be assessed as a temporary foster carer. There are no statutory requirements for this, and it is proposed that arrangements are informal and that delegated authority⁵ can be used (alongside risk assessment/DBS check and home safety check).

School Related Clothing

- 4.9 The school related clothing allowance (when a child joins a new school, changes school), has increased. In addition, there is a new provision for costs towards a year 11 prom outfit. Payment for school related clothing will only be paid for clothes bought from the point that the policy is live and will not be back dated.

Parent and Child

- 4.10 The payment structure for parent and child foster placements has been simplified and now differentiates between an assessed and non-assessed placement⁶.

Out of Hours Carers

- 4.11 It has been challenging to attract foster carers to be on-call and to provide emergency placements out of hours. The proposal is that the on-call fee is increased, and that on-call foster carers are also given a new emergency one off payment if a child is placed with them out of hours.

Day Time only Foster Care

- 4.12 This is where a foster carer is asked by the fostering service to care for a child or children during the day with no overnight stay. The previous structure was age band related which meant that foster carers received more for older children. This was not fair and equitable and has been changed to be based on skills level only.

⁵ The process that enables foster carers to make common sense everyday decisions about the children they care for.

⁶ Assessed placement - Where foster carers have been trained to assess and supervise parents who have a new baby. Non-assessed placement - where there is no assessment element.



Supported Lodgings

- 4.13 The recommended payment structure simplifies the calculations and provides the supported lodgings carer with an increased payment in line with other local authorities.

Staying Put

- 4.14 The proposed staying put structure now aligns with the supported lodgings payments.

Refer a Friend

- 4.15 We currently offer £500 if a foster carer introduces someone who goes on to be approved as a Portsmouth foster carer. It is proposed that this payment also includes the newly approved foster carer once the first child has been placed.

Overnight Fostering Respite Care

- 4.16 Respite care is agreed when the needs of the child are assessed as being at such a level that the primary foster carers need a break to boost placement stability. The payment arrangements remain the same, however for equity, the respite carer will no longer receive the clothing, savings, and pocket money element of the fostering allowance as this remains with the main foster carer.

Travel

- 4.17 The fostering allowance covers an element towards the cost of travel expenses which arise from the need to make trips relating to the child (eg school, nursery transport, health, medical appointments, family time, and meetings). Currently the foster carer absorbs the costs of the first 25 miles driven each week, and mileage over this can be claimed for. Other local authorities (including neighbouring authorities) expect all travel expenses to be covered by the fostering allowance or they have a higher threshold. The proposal is to raise the threshold to 63 miles.

5. Integrated impact assessment

- 5.1 See Appendix B.

6. Legal implications

- 6.1 There has been a significant increase in difficulties in finding placements over the past 2 years. This puts an added strain on the care proceedings taken in respect of vulnerable children who the Local Authority seeks to remove from their parents due to significant risk of harm. This has seen cases where children (who would have been removed from their parents by the Court) have had to remain in placement with parents during proceedings because of lack of placements. This could result in future challenges from those children when they reach adulthood due to a failure to protect them from harm at the earliest opportunity.



6.2 The new policy regarding fees is not to be retrospective and so does not include those existing Special Guardianship Carers. Foster carers who take on an SGO are entitled to their foster carer payments for up to 2 years following the making of an Order - SGO Regulations 2005 Chapter 2 Regulation 7. This policy relates only to a skills element of the foster carer allowance. SGO carers are not subject to the obligations of a foster carer, as such they would not be entitled to an enhancement of this payment post the making of an SGO.

7. Director of Finance's comments

7.1 The table in paragraph 4.2 details the annual financial implications of the specific changes to the different allowances, based on the carers and children and young people in the financial year 2023/24. The additional budget the policy requires will be met from a mixture of any inflation given in 2024/25 and existing 2023/24 budgets.

7.2 The implementation date of 7 April 2024 for the weekly allowances will be dependent on the project plan which will include changes to processes, the Fostering Handbook and system reconfiguration. If the changes are made after 7 April, the increases to the weekly allowances will be backdated accordingly.

7.3 The annual increases to the standard weekly age related fostering allowances and associated allowances, have been quoted in the 2024/25 policy, which is line with the national increases. The financial implications of these increases are always dealt with separately once the budget is agreed by the City Council, and this will be the same process for the financial year 2024/25.

Signed by: Sarah Daly, Director of Children, Families & Education

Appendices:

Appendix A - Carers' Fees and Allowances Policy 2024/25

Appendix B - Integrated Impact Assessment

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location



The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/ deferred/ rejected by on

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Signed by: **Councillor Suzy Horton, Cabinet Member Children, Families and Education**