

CABINET

DATE	21 st August 2024
REPORT OF	Councillor Margaret Cracknell – Portfolio Holder of Children and Education
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	Ann-Marie Matson Director for Children's Services
SUBJECT	Our Offer to Foster Carer's
STATUS	Open
FORWARD PLAN REF NO.	CB 08/24/01

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

Further developing and improving our offer and support package to foster carers to retain and recruit more directly aligns with the children in care sufficiency strategy and the councils' priorities to:

- Enhance the experiences and outcomes of children who do need to come into care through sufficient high quality foster carers, support that enables re-unification with family members and care that meet the child's needs.
- Recruit, retain, and develop our workforce to be able to support children and families in the best possible way that builds on the importance of relationships, knowledge, and skills. Although foster cares are not employed by the Council they play a key role as corporate parents as part of our wider workforce and therefore we believe it's as important to invest in them the same way we do Council employees.
- Improving outcomes for children by educating children within their own borough, through the development of the wider offer, With the aim to recruit more in-house foster carers this reduces the number of children needing to be placed outside of the area and encourages education and connections within their local community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To refresh and improve the service and wider partnership offer to foster carers to promote recruitment and retention and increase the Council's foster carer capacity. This will provide greater choice, enable the best matches of children to their carers and reduce the need to use external, commissioned carers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Approves the principles of enhancement of the offer to foster carers as illustrated by this report.

2. Delegates authority to the Director for Children's Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Children and Education to develop and implement a range of enhancements, subject to adherence to usual governance arrangements in respect of any council tax discount.

REASONS FOR DECISION

A desktop exercise undertaken in 2023/2024 found the current approach to foster carers and what we offer to them was inconsistent and required improvement. In addition to this, it was identified 44% of children who go into foster care within NELC are currently placed with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's). As well as being a more costly option to the authority, we recognise that where children are placed in-house (NELC Appointed), our Fostering Team have a good knowledge of their carers' abilities and know that the children and young people will be provided with stability and good care resulting in good outcomes. These factors prompted discovery work into how we as a council can ensure to appoint more foster carers and retain the ones we already have. Following desktop research, workshops, engagement with carers and the team the following recommendations are being made as a way to enhance of fostering offer in North East Lincolnshire.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

We recognise the important role a foster carer has on a child's life. Offering support and stability in a safe and loving environment close to local connections and community. Figures show the decline in our in-house fostering capacity within the last 4 years.

- 1.1 The Council is committed to providing as many loving homes as possible for children in care and has been working to increase our foster care capacity through recruitment and retention activities- our offer to carers being one of the main drivers.
- 1.2 Following desktop research of other successful local authorities, workshops, engagement with carers and the team the recommendations are being made as a way to enhance of fostering offer in North East Lincolnshire.
- 1.3 In a workshop held with foster carers in March 2024, the findings concluded that foster carers' biggest values are receiving support, recognition, and consistency from the council. We believe that a clear skills-based fee model, alongside a robust support and learning and development offers, will enhance our approach, improve consistency, offer structured support and be attractive to potential new carers . The proposed council tax discount will also support the retention of carers and also act as incentives for the recruitment of new carers. This will mean it is more likely carers will choose to join the Council fostering provision rather than an Independent Fostering Agency providing increased choice, leading to better matching of children to carers and increased availability of our own local foster carers to meet the needs of our children.

1.4 An illustrative range of support would include:

- 1.4.1 Introduction of an allowance model that considers and recognises carers skills and experience.
- 1.4.2 The implementation of a revised comprehensive new learning and development package that will underpin the allowance model and allow carers to feel fully trained and supported.
- 1.4.3 Offer of a 100% council tax discount to Mainstream Carers, 25% to short break and Kinship (within a set criteria)
- 1.4.4 Offer of wellbeing support.
- 1.4.5 Creation of a Unique Foster carer reward card – Utilising Foster friendly businesses.
- 1.4.6 Working with foster carers to improve the peer mentoring and support within the foster carer network.
- 1.4.7 Putting the Team around the family approach into practice.

2. RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES AND EQUALITY ISSUES

Risks:

- 2.1 Due to the inconsistencies and limitations of current arrangements, they are not effectively providing a fostering offer that delivers on the needs and wants of our current foster carers. This has led to a number of carers choosing to leave the authority and there is an increasing risk we are unable to retain our current carers resulting in a smaller in-house fostering cohort unable to meet the needs of our children.
- 2.2 If unable to proceed with the improvement of the fostering offer, in the future there is the significant risk of overspend in other areas of children services such as agency placements.
- 2.3 There will be an increasing number of children that will be placed with fostering agencies and external children's homes and not kept within their local community where it could be otherwise avoided if there was sufficient fostering capacity to offer them a home.

Opportunities:

- 2.4 If the number of foster carers were to increase there could be a need to increase social workers within the fostering team. Any calculations in relation to the proposal has taken this consideration into account.

By proceeding with the improvements of the fostering offer, it would take advantage of the following:

- 2.5 Maximising the local authorities fostering capacity to better support our young people.
- 2.6 Our foster carers feeling valued and supported as corporate parents.

3. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 3.1 Do nothing - Due to the increasing need for foster carers to be recruited and retained, the do-nothing option is not viable. The opportunity needs to be taken as a preventative and developmental measure rather than a reactive solution. The fostering service and increasing the fostering capacity is also outlined as a priority within the Children's Services improvement journey.
- 3.2 Improve only elements of the current offer: This option is already forming within the fostering service as practice improvements are being made both from foster carer feedback and self-assessments. In addition to this the fostering service are currently receiving additional capacity from the Transformation team, communications and learning and development to embed and deliver on any improvements made. Whilst this will enable the effective delivery of the improved offer detailed above should it be agreed, without this, it is anticipated that there will continue to be an increasing number of children who will be placed with fostering agencies and not kept within their local community where it could be otherwise avoided if there was sufficient fostering capacity to offer them a home. Therefore, it is felt that the local authority should use the insights from our foster carers to fully improve the offer where possible.

4. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 From the insights received it demonstrates that showing willingness and action to change and based on listening to feedback holds equal value in the retention of our foster carers as the financial benefits listed above and therefore no change could result in loss of carers.
- 4.2 The project group has ensured transparent communication has been provided to current foster carers throughout the project lifespan and ensured that their feedback is listened to and actioned upon. If permission was granted to proceed with the improvements of the offer the team and project group would ensure this communication is maintained and all carers are given clear and timely communications regarding any confirmed change.

5. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 The proposal will be financed within the current fostering budget. With the incentive for carers to progress their skills and experience, the model hopes to recruit and retain highly skilled foster carers who could offer homes to children who may otherwise be placed with independent fostering or residential homes out of area.
- 5.2 Despite a reduction in council tax income the proposed changes would have an overall positive impact on the council's revenue budget due to reducing pressures and making savings in other areas.

6. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 By proceeding with the transformation of the NELC fostering offer, it would improve the outcomes for children and young people by:

- 6.2 Ensuring foster carers are skilled and equipped to be able to best support young people. An enhanced learning offer will be available and tailored to foster carers' needs and the child they have in their care enabling children to grow up feeling safe, stable and loved.
- 6.3 Increase our in-house fostering capacity which will enable more children who come into care to be able to live within borough close to their family, education setting and connections.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

In reducing the amount of out of area placements we use for children of Northeast Lincolnshire, this would reduce social worker travel out of borough and therefore carbon emissions to better achieve the council's goal of becoming carbon neutral.

8. CONSULTATION WITH SCRUTINY

The proposal was presented to Childrens Scrutiny on the 25th July 2024.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The net impact of the proposals within the report, which include a reduction to Council tax income, will be met from existing budget envelopes within Childrens Services.
- 9.2 Projections are based upon an assumed increase in in-house foster carers and an associated reduction in other more costly placement types.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. Whilst the majority of the proposed improvements can be developed and implemented at service level, and within extant budget envelopes, any recalibration of the council tax support scheme will be subject to a recommendation of Cabinet to Full Council. This should be part of the overall budget setting process for 2025/2026 and subject to further report to Cabinet at that time.
- 10.2. Any Council Tax Support Scheme is a matter for the individual authority and various discounts, exemptions and disregards can be made subject to Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) (England) Regulations 2012 (as amended)

11. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct HR implications arising from the contents of this report.

12. WARD IMPLICATIONS

All wards may be affected.

13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

The proposal has been presented to the business development group on the 17th July 2024.

The proposal will be presented to scrutiny on the 25th July 2024.

14. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

Paul Cowling – Service Director for Regulated Provision

Queenie Carrie – Deputy Service Director – Regulated provision

COUNCILLOR MARGARET CRACKNELL
PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR
CHILDREN AND EDUCATION

Foster Carers Skills Assessment Framework



Introduction:

Skills Assessments are a tool that can be used to measure foster carers skills, experience, and capabilities to ensure that children and young people are appropriately matched with the best foster carers to meet their needs, and to ensure that foster carers are appropriately financially rewarded for the level of care that they provide.

A 3-tiered skills model takes into account carers experience, skills and abilities and learning and development, with Level One, being considered as foundation level of fostering, Level Two being an intermediate and Level Three being the most advanced level of skills, abilities, and experience in fostering.

Both skills to foster training and the training offer will contribute towards and align the Fostering Services National Minimum standards, the Annual review will then evidence that the carers have provided care to all children in line with these standards.

- 1- Understand the principles and values essential for fostering children and young people
- 2- Understand the role as a foster carer
- 3- Understand health and safety and healthy care
- 4- Know how to communicate effectively
- 5- Understand the development of children and young people
- 6- Safeguard children and young people (ie keep them safe from harm)
- 7- Develop themselves.

As a practice minimum for all levels, All foster carers should have actively engaged in their 6 weekly supervision sessions with their Supervising Social Worker (SSW), completed accurate weekly / monthly summaries for the children placed with them, and attended Child in Care reviews, as well as other relevant meetings wherever possible.

Level 1 : Foster Carer / Kinship Carers - Age related maintenance payment plus level 1 payment

Practice requirement: Practice expectation is that all newly approved foster carers would start their Fostering Career as Level One foster carers.

Carers would likely have some transferable skills, but not significant direct experience of caring for, of fostering, children in care.

Kinship carers under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 would be Level One carers, in recognition of the pre-existing relationship between the carer and the child, and the largely short-term nature of such placements.

+ Skills requirement:

Prior to approval at Fostering Panel prospective foster carers skills and abilities will be assessed via BAAF Form F for mainstream carers and connected persons / Schedule 21 assessment for kinship carers.

Prior to approval prospective carers will have successfully completed the Skills to Foster Course and be able to demonstrate their learning, this course also contributes to the mandatory training standards that need to be covered within the first year of being an approved carer. Ongoing assessment of Carers suitability to be approved as Level One foster carers would be through their usual Annual Fostering Review.

Each carer will have completed and maintained all core mandatory training

- First Aid
- Safeguarding

In addition to the Mandatory training on an annual basis carers are required to completed all their fostering training national minimum standards, these should be met in the below way:

- Minimum of 3 placement specific learning events which can be a mix of in person training or eLearning but must total a minimum of 8 hours' worth of training and development.
- Minimum of 1 self-directed learning opportunity

Level 2 foster carers - Age related maintenance payment plus Level 2 Skills payment

Practice requirement: Carers Will have been an experienced approved foster carer for a minimum of 2 years for either NEL, or another LA, or an IFA, AND during that time had children placed with them for a minimum of 80% of the time, which equates to approximately 10 months in every 12 per year of approval before being eligible for progressing to a Level 2 Carer.

Or,

Able to demonstrate significant transferable work experience for a minimum of 2 years of caring for children with complex needs, for example residential children's homes, paediatric nursing, teaching, or TA support specialist education setting, or provided care to vulnerable adults, for example in mental health setting, learning disability care home.

+ Skills requirement:

For approved Carers looking to progress from Level One to Level Two each annual review should evidence that they have consistently maintained the skills levels required for Level 1 and completed the below:

- Minimum of 3 placement specific learning events at level 2 which can be a mix of in person training or eLearning but must total a minimum of 12 hours' worth of training and development.
- Minimum of 3 self-directed learning opportunity. (Minimum total of four hours).

Each carer will have completed and maintained all core mandatory training:

- First Aid
- Safeguarding
- (additional training could be mandatory dependant on placement type- this will be agreed between the foster carer and the SSW as per the carers personal development plan)

Carers are required to reflect upon their learning during supervision sessions with the SSW and demonstrate their ability to improve skills and knowledge and evidence that they have embedded the learning in their day to day fostering on an ongoing basis.

To progress to level 2 carers require a positive professional reference from someone working with their child ie CSW, teacher and also comments from child's family about how carer works with them to support application in addition to training requirements.

Carers are required to attend a minimum of 4 Fostering Support Events annually; which includes providing positive buddy/mentor support to level 1 foster carers.

The Annual Review for promotion to Level 2 should evidence that the Carers have provided care to all children placed with them in line with the Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards:

- 1 - Consistently care for children in their care who have needs over and above children of a similar chronological age, demonstrating that they are significantly improving the outcomes for children and young people.
- 2 - Demonstrate that they can support children through times of difficulties and challenge to ensure that they are supported to remain living with them, or that they are moved to a new home in a planned way when that is possible.
- 3 – Consistently delivering Health and Safety and Healthy care as outlined within the National Minimum Standards
- 4- Help children learn boundaries of acceptable behaviour, without the use of physical or inappropriate punishments, confidently managed children's negative reactions and disappointments, understand that behaviours are often rooted in trauma, encourage and reward positive behaviours.
- 5/6- Worked positively with a range of professionals central to children placed with them, shared relative information in a timely way, and supported all aspects of children's care plans.
- 5 -Regularly attended, and contribute to childcare reviews, and other professional's meetings, advocating on behalf of the children in their care to ensure that their voice, wishes, and feelings are central to the meetings.
- 5 – Be equipped with the skills and training to be able to care for children with disabilities.
- 6 – Have the ability and understanding to keep children safe from harm and by Support young people who are at risk of going missing.
- 7 - Provide support to the wider fostering network.

All foster carers should have actively engaged in their 6 weekly supervision sessions with their Supervising Social Worker (SSW) and be reflective of the fostering experiences.

Completed accurate detailed weekly /monthly summaries for the children placed with them, and produced written reports for Children in Care Reviews, and supported to complete other written reports required, for example Court reports.

To compliment the Annual Review that the SSW completes about the Foster Carer, the Carers themselves should complete a self-assessment to further evidence their skills and abilities, and commitment to their own development.

Carers self-assessment should take the form of a workbook similar to the TSD workbook, or Progression Report.

Level 3 foster carers – Age related maintenance payment plus Level 3 skills payment

Practice requirement: Practice expectation is that carers would have been an experienced approved foster carer for a minimum of 3 years in total for either NEL, or another LA, or an IFA, AND during that time had children placed with them for a minimum of 80% of the time, which equates to approximately 10 months in every 12 per year of approval before being eligible for progressing to a Level 3 Carer.

Or,

2 years as a Level 2 Foster Carer, if the Carer was approved at this intermediate level because they were able to demonstrate significant transferable work experience for a minimum of 2 years of caring for children with complex needs, for example residential children's homes, paediatric nursing, teaching or TA support specialist education setting, or providing care for vulnerable adults, for example in mental health setting, learning disability care home.

+ Skills requirement:

Each carer will have completed and maintained all core mandatory training:

- First Aid
- Safeguarding
- (additional training could be mandatory dependant on placement type- this will be agreed between the foster carer and the SSW as per the carers personal development plan)

In addition to the Mandatory training on an annual basis carers are to complete:

- Minimum of 5 placement specific learning events which can be mix of in person training or eLearning but must total a minimum of 16 hours' worth of training and development.
- Minimum of 3 self-directed learning opportunity

Carers are required to reflect upon their learning during supervision sessions with the SSW and demonstrate the ability to improve skills and knowledge and evidence that they have embedded the learning in their day to day fostering on an ongoing basis.

To progress to level 3 carers require a positive professional reference from someone working with their child ie CSW, teacher and also comments from child's family about how carer works with them to support application in addition to training requirements.

Carers are required to attend a minimum of 5 Fostering Support Events annually; which includes providing positive buddy/mentor support to level 1&2 foster carers.

The Annual Review for promotion to Level 3 should evidence that the Carers have provided care to all children placed with them in line with the Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards:

- 1 - Successfully, and consistently cared for children who have previously experienced placement breakdowns, have significantly challenging behaviour, have complex emotional needs or medical conditions, and have the ability to transition a young person stepping down from residential provision.
- 2 Proven track record of being highly flexible and receptive to a variety of placement requests, with the expectation that the carers will largely be matched with children with high levels of needs as detailed above.
- 3 - Successfully and consistently provide Health and Safety and Health care to all children.
- 4- Able to effectively and restoratively communicate with children and those with more complex needs to enable positive relationships.
- 5 – Proven ability and demonstration of working positively consistently and successfully alongside a range of professionals central to children in their care. Consistently share relevant information in a timely way in all aspects of a child's care.
- 6 – Successfully and consistently demonstrate the ability and understanding of keeping children safe from harm by supporting those who are at risk of going missing from home and education.
- 7 Proven history of regularly supporting the Fostering Service, for example by co-delivering Skills to Foster, or other fostering specific training, formal mentoring, or buddying of new, inexperienced carers, providing support with Recruitment campaigns, contributing to the development of the service.

All foster carers should have actively engaged in their 6 weekly supervision sessions with their Supervising Social Worker (SSW) and been reflective about their fostering experiences.

Carers should have completed accurate detailed weekly/monthly summaries for the children placed with them and been able to produce thorough written report for Children in Care Reviews, or other requirements such as Court reports.

To compliment the Annual Review that the SSW completes about the Foster Carer, the Carers themselves should complete a self – assessment to further evidence their skills and abilities, and commitment to their own development.

Carers self- assessment could take the form of a workbook like the TSD workbook, or Progression Report. (See Appendix for examples)

Decision making framework for the skills model:

Given the financial implications for individual foster carers, and the Fostering Service it is imperative that the application of such a skills model for assessing foster carer is robust, and fair, and the governance arrangements remain fixed and consistent over time.

On this basis, foster carers are required to formally write to the service requesting that their annual review considers their suitability for moving up a Skills level, if that is something they wish to be considered for, at the point whereby they have at the minimum completed years of fostering service.

This is not to say that progression shouldn't be a conversation during supervision sessions generally, which should have some focus on enhancing carers development in any event, but a formal request of such nature would also elicit a consistent approach from the Fostering Service to assess each carer who wishes to progress, rather than it being down to the individual practice of any one SSW.

As has been detailed in the description of the Model, that part of Annual Review focuses on the specific skill set, and additional requirements from the SSW perspective, with the Carers also being required to independently provide a range of evidence to support their skills and fostering experiences over the course of time either by a report, or a workbook.

If a Carer is not in agreement with the Fostering Service recommendations, for example if progression wasn't recommended, whereby a Deputy service director will review this case by case alongside the evidence provided.

The Fostering Service should also use the skills framework to assess foster carers suitability over time to maintain fostering at higher levels at each annual review and could make recommendation that they are not currently fulfilling the requirements of a more advanced carer. For example, if they had been subject to Standards of Care process that had not been successfully resolved in a defined time period.

It is to be noted moving down, as well as up the levels, has the corresponding level of governance arrangements and sign off.

Should this be the case, it is anticipated that through regular supervision the foster carers would have been aware that this was a potential option, and should they wish to challenge

this step-down approach in their skill level, and corresponding remuneration they would have the opportunity through submitting their own report, or workbook to provide evidence to the contrary.

Foster Carers could also request a step down in Skills Level, should they no longer wish to continue to have children placed with them with higher level of needs, in this way NEL foster carers could prolong their fostering career over time but at a less demanding level.

All skills allowance fee's will be reviewed on an annual basis.

Council Tax – Foster Carer Discount Scheme

North East Lincolnshire Council is passionate about providing a family-based care for Children and Young people.

Foster carers are fully supported by North East Lincolnshire Council and the corporate parent partners. We recognise the dedication of Foster families through this Council Tax relief. Mainstream Foster carers who meet the eligibility criteria can claim 100% council tax relief. Shortbreak Foster Carers who meet the eligibility criteria can claim 25% council tax relief.

Kinship Foster Carers who meet the eligibility criteria can claim 25% council tax relief

Council tax is worked out by day and the relief will be applied to each day you meet the eligibility criteria. Please ensure you read the criteria fully. Any household who applies for the exemption is responsible for ensure the claim is valid. Any incorrect claim will be recovered by North East Lincs Council. Any queries about a claim can be answered on XXXX or XXXX

Criteria:

- Approved North East Lincs foster carers including short break and Kinship carers.
- AND · Are liable for some council tax on their property
- AND · Claim all relevant benefits and discounts to which you would usually be entitled
- AND · Claim this exemption only on the one property in which you live
- AND · Agree to receiving this council tax relief, keeping council tax up to date with changes
- AND · If a full time foster carer has a child in full time, consistently for no less than 3 weeks (excluding holidays) in the month.
- OR · Where approval is for short break only has a child placed with them at least twice per 4 week period.
- IF - The carer has a young person residing with them and live outside of the LA and are within a 15 mile radius. The carer will receive a equivalent Financial relief payment on NEL bandings if all other criteria are met. Proof of council tax must be received in order to receive this direct payment.

Carers will not be eligible if:

- You resign as foster carers- You will resume paying council tax from the date of written resignation received or the date the child in your care leaves
- You intend to take a break from fostering
- The LA do not consider them available for reasons of concern, health and safety, safeguarding or other relevant factors
- A young person has not been in their care as detailed in the criteria above.

To apply for this discount, please complete Part One of form in full and ask your Fostering Social worker to sign Part two. Once complete please return to **updated email address to be inserted prior to go live**

PART ONE

Applicant's Name/s:	
Date of Birth:	
Your Address:	
Your Council Tax Account Number:	
Email Address:	
Contact Telephone Number:	
Date Eligibility and Criteria met:	

Are you the only person over the age of 18 living at this address? YES / NO

Please provide details of all other persons resident in the property and their relationship to yourself and Residency status -For example Joint tenant, partner Name	Date of Birth	Residency Status

You must continue to make payments of your Council Tax as demanded until such time as you receive a revised Bill. Making an application does not mean you can stop or reduce the payments requested. Any overpayment made, will be reimbursed to you.

On the signing of this form you agree that, to the best of your knowledge, the information contained on the form is complete and is not false. You have read the criteria and eligibility. Wilfully making a false statement on the application form is a criminal offence and any individual that intentionally and dishonestly provides false information, will be investigated under the Fraud Act 2006 and may be liable for prosecution. Any False claim will be re-imbursed by you. By signing this you agree to keep the information in the claim up to date and notify North East Lincs Council Tax department of any changes, house moves or ending of eligibility.

Signed

Applicant 1	
Applicant 2	

PART TWO- fostering service

By noting the below and signing this form you are confirming that the person named in Section 1 meets the criteria in the policy for the Foster Carer Discount Scheme.

I confirm that:

The person/s named in Section 1 [enter name] is a North East Lincs Council approved Foster Carer and of this date meets the eligibility criteria.

Name:	Title:
Signature:	Date:
Contact Phone Number	Contact Email address