

North Tyneside Council

Report to Cabinet

Date: 28 November 2022

Title: Fostering Strategy 2022-25 – Review and Refresh of Strategy

Portfolio(s): Children Young People and Learning	Cabinet Member(s): Councillor Steven Phillips
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Report from Service

Area: Health, Education, Care and Safeguarding

Responsible Officer: Julie Firth, Director of Children's Services (0191) 643 5943

Wards affected: All Wards

PART 1

1.1 Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to seek Cabinet approval for the proposed changes within the refresh of the Fostering Strategy, attached at Appendix 1, for the three-year period 2022 to 2025. The strategy seeks to give effect to the Authority's duties under Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 which requires the Authority take steps to secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the Authority's area which meets the needs of children that the Local Authority care for and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the Local Authority's area (the so-called 'sufficiency duty').

The Fostering Strategy has the following key aims and objectives:

1. To increase the total number of local Foster Carers available for the children and young people of North Tyneside who require care
2. To increase the number of Foster Carers with the skills to care for teenagers;
3. To increase the number of Foster Carers with the skills to care for sibling groups;
4. To improve the resilience of our Foster Carers through our support to them, reducing the number of foster care arrangements which break down;
5. To cease the use of Independent Fostering Agency placements in emergency situations;
6. To reduce the number of external Children's Home placements for children and young people in favour of placements with skilled Foster Carers.

1.2 Recommendation(s):

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Approve the Fostering Strategy 2022-25 which is attached to this report at Appendix 1; and
2. Authorise the Director of Children's Services in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning, the Director of Resources and the Assistant Chief Executive to review the Fostering Strategy and to make any amendments to the Strategy as appropriate.

1.3 Forward Plan:

Twenty eight days notice of this report has been given and it first appeared on the Forward Plan that was published on 21st October 2022.

1.4 Council Plan and Policy Framework

This report relates to the following priority in the 2021/25 Our North Tyneside Plan:

A caring North Tyneside:

- Our People will be cared for, protected and supported if they become vulnerable including if they become homeless

1.5 Information:

1.5.1 Background

The Authority has pledged to the children and young people of the Borough that it will only care for them when it has first worked tirelessly to keep them safe within their family home. The Authority successfully delivers on this pledge and hundreds of children who remain within their family home and connected to their community because of the help and support that the Authority and its partners provide to make it safe for them to do so.

When it is absolutely necessary for a child or young person to move from their family home to keep them safe, the Authority will try to place a child or young person in the care of someone known to them and part of their family and friends network. Such placements minimise the impact on children and young people having to leave their own home. At the current time there are approximately 100 of our children helped in this way by the Authority.

Where the network of family and friends around a child or young person is not able to care for them, the Authority requires Foster Carers – residents who open their door and their lives to a child or young person in need of love and care. At any one time, approximately 100 of our children and young people are cared for in Foster Care. Accordingly, Foster Carers make an extraordinary and important contribution to the life of our community.

Nationally, there are too few Foster Carers for the number of children and young people requiring care. This is also the situation locally. The Authority has faced significant challenge in recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of Foster Carers to meet the

needs of the Borough, in particular Foster Carers skilled at caring for teenagers, and Foster Carers who are skilled at caring for sibling groups. Set against this challenging need, the Authority is recruiting in an increasingly competitive marketplace for new carers, with other local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies actively recruiting residents within our Borough.

The Authority understands that wherever possible children in care should live in a family environment for their health and wellbeing. The Authority's in-house fostering arrangements are the most cost-effective way of caring for our children, costing on average £199.54 per week. Alternative arrangements prove more costly, listed below:

- independent agency foster care arrangement – average cost of £777 per week
- in-house children's home – average cost of £2,894 per week
- children's home with a private provider – average cost of £4,481 per week (with the range of costs between £3,500 and £10,000 per week)

These costs are increasing, not only due to market forces but also as a result of current inflationary pressures and the increased costs of living.

It is the ambition of the Authority to provide a competitive foster care service to children and young people who need it, by recruiting the right number of Foster Carers with the right skills.

To achieve this ambition, the Authority have refreshed the Fostering Strategy to offer a competitive fostering allowances payment structure to improve recruitment and retention of Foster Carers, and which meets the Government recommended levels, and includes proposals to:

- Annually review and increase age related allowances in line with the National Minimum Allowance as set by the Government
- Phase out the use of teen supplement
- Introduce a £75 second child fee
- Cease the out of hours Foster Carer Advice and Support telephone service
- Introduce Foster Carer clinics with HIVE counsellors
- Expand outreach support offer

1.5.2 Annually review and increase age related allowances in line with the National Minimum Allowance as set by the Government

Foster carers are paid age-related child allowances to cover the cost of the foster child's living expenses. The National Minimum Allowance (NMA) is set annually in April by the Government as a basic rate that local authorities should pay. Although it is not statutory to comply, it is considered best practice to adopt the NMA annually. The Authority currently pays below the NMA and has received letters from Will Quince MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, requesting reasons why the Authority is not meeting Government recommended minimum levels.

Table 1 below shows that the Authority pays below recommended NMA levels (apart from the 11-15 cohort) and across the region, the Authority provides the lowest age-related allowances. There is no recommendation to reduce the North Tyneside allowance for the 11-15 cohort, in line with the NMA, however it will be frozen at the current level until the NMA rate for 11-15 year olds reaches the same level.

Table 1:

Current recommended NMA by age bracket	0 – 2 £137	3 – 4 £141	5 – 10 £156	11 – 15 £177	16+ £207
North Tyneside	£134.49		£147.84	£184.05	£194
Durham	£144		£156	£178	£208
Gateshead	£141		£156	£192	£234
Newcastle	£140		£159	£204	£242
Redcar and Cleveland	£145		£165 (5-11)	£205 (12-16)	£250
Stockton	£150		£170	£210	£255

The level of future NMA increases cannot be predicted. For illustration purposes, table 2 below shows level of allowances if the Government introduced a 2%, 5% and 10% increase.

Table 2:

Current recommended NMA by age bracket	0 – 2 £137	3 – 4 £141	5 – 10 £156	11 – 15 £177	16+ £207
2% increase	£143		£159	£180	£211
5% increase	£148		£163	£185	£217
10% increase	£155		£171	£194	£227

Adopting the NMA will impact on Special Guardianship allowances, Child Arrangement Order allowances, and Adoption Order allowances due to the means testing and financial calculation of these allowances, with fostering allowance as the base measure.

Table 3 below outlines the impact of aligning all current foster care allowances with National Minimum levels. Figures shown are subject to change as part of individual circumstances of annual financial reviews.

Table 3:

Service Type	Number	Weekly Sum of Difference	Annual Difference	Jan to March (13 weeks)
Connected Persons	121	£559.66	£29,102.32	£7,275.58
In-House Fostering	121	£461.48	£23,996.96	£5,999.24
Adoption	35	£115.48	£6,004.96	£1,501.24
CAO	34	£161.12	£8,378.24	£2,094.56
SGO	280	£1,511.89	£78,618.28	£19,654.57
Grand Total	591	£2,809.63	£146,100.76	£36,525.19

Based upon the current NMA, to align foster care allowances would result in an additional cost to the Authority of **£146,100.76** per year. Part-year implementation (from January to March 2023) would result in an additional cost to the Authority of **£36,525.19** for this financial year.

Aligning allowances would improve the offer to prospective Foster Carers and mitigate any legal challenge from current Foster Carers, therefore reducing the financial and reputational risk to the Authority.

Fees for Foster Carers

1.5.3 Phase out the teen supplement

Foster Carers on the accredited band are paid £60 per week for each teenager they care for. Currently, the Authority pays this supplement to 18 accredited Foster Carers for 43 children (equating to **£2,580** per week and **£134,160** per year). Most teenagers are living with mainstream Foster Carers who receive the advanced or specialist fee, when it is commensurate with their skills and experience. As many teenagers have complex and sometimes challenging behaviour, they often need skilled and experienced Foster Carers. Removing the teen supplement streamlines the allowances and fees.

The refreshed strategy proposes that the Authority phase out the existing teen supplement over the next five years. Existing teen supplements will be phased out as the children reach the age of 18. The supplement will remain in place for those carers currently receiving it but would not be available for any children turning 13 in the future, or to new children entering foster care. Instead, the allowances for the various age brackets will be linked to the recommended NMA levels to ensure that the Authority meets its obligations.

The Authority will continue to monitor trends and any impact on the number of Foster Carers willing to look after teenagers.

1.5.4 Introduce £75 second child fee

The Authority currently pay carers £75 for third and fourth children, but do not do so for second children. While this may encourage Foster Carers to care for more than two

children, this could also discourage those carers with one child from caring for a further child.

The refreshed strategy proposes that the Authority introduce a £75 second child fee, which would result in an additional cost to the Authority of **£206,700** per year. Part-year implementation (from January to March 2023) would result in an additional cost to the Authority of **£45,825** for this financial year (see table below).

Carer	Number of 2nd children	Weekly cost @ £75 pw	Annual cost	Jan to March (13 weeks)
Mainstream	30	£2,250	£117,000	£29,250
Connected	23	£1,725	£89,700	£22,425
Grand Total	53	£3,975	£206,700	£45,825

Introducing the £75 second child fee may encourage Foster Carers to care for more than one child.

1.5.5 Cease the out of hours Foster Carer Advice and Support telephone service

The out of hours Foster Carer Advice and Support service is available to Foster Carers to provide advice and meaningful support to those who, at times can find the role challenging and overwhelming, as well rewarding. The service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to support Foster Carers who wish to speak immediately and directly to a specialist Fostering Social Worker.

A recent review of the out of hours service has identified that on average only one Foster Carer per week uses the service. This service is currently paid for from the staffing budget and totals £27,000 per year.

The refreshed strategy proposes that the service be removed and replaced by other more effective supports, including Mockingbird constellations. Mockingbird is a model of fostering which replicates the extended family in supporting children and Foster Carers. The research from the Fostering Network indicates that this is a successful model in promoting stability of foster care arrangements and recruitment and retention of Foster Carers. Foster Carers will continue to be provided with effective and meaningful advice and support through the day time foster care service, Mockingbird constellations and have access to Emergency Duty Team (EDT) out of hours service should they require additional advice or support.

1.5.6 Introduce Foster Carer clinics with HIVE counsellors

To enhance support to Foster Carers, it is proposed that the Authority will introduce a fortnightly or monthly clinic with 30-minute slots for Foster Carers to discuss with Health, Information and Advice, Virtual School and Emotional Wellbeing Team (HIVE) Counsellors and social workers the children they are caring for, the impact it is having on them and their family, and any strategies to support their care.

This will not result in a financial impact to implement but would enhance the existing HIVE extended offer.

1.5.7 Expand outreach support offer

Babysitting support is provided to foster carers for attendance at training and meetings, and outreach support is usually provided for children with additional care needs to prevent foster care arrangement breaking down, where alternative short break arrangements cannot be provided. The Authority currently pay £5 per hour for babysitting

and outreach, these will be paid separately in future (enabling better financial management). The current fee of £5 per hour does not attract specialist carers.

It is recommended that babysitting payments remain at £5 per hour, and outreach support be paid at £13 per hour from 7am to 11pm and, £30 per sleep-in if this was outside of the carers home. This will encourage Foster Carers with the skills to provide outreach support to children with additional care needs to come forward.

1.6 Decision options:

The following decision options are available for consideration by Cabinet:

Option 1

Cabinet accepts the recommendations set out in paragraph 1.2.

Option 2

Cabinet does not accept the recommendations set out in paragraph 1.2.

Option 1 is the recommended option.

1.7 Reasons for recommended option:

Option 1 is recommended to meet the Foster Care needs of the Borough.

The Authority needs to increase the number of mainstream Foster Carers to meet the needs of children and young people in the care population, particularly teenagers and sibling groups. Keeping these children in North Tyneside maintains their family network, community links and stability in education. Children have better future outcomes by living within a family environment.

Many Foster Carers in North Tyneside are from older generations who have the time and resources to look after children in their homes. However, this does mean that the Authority regularly have carers who choose to retire from the profession. In 2021/22 the Authority received 13 resignations. This year to date there has been 8 resignations. It is imperative that new Foster Carers are recruited to ensure that numbers are maintained and, to deliver on the aims of the strategy, increased.

Adopting the strategy, with the aim of recruiting 30 mainstream Foster Carers, will allow the Authority to:

- reduce the use of IFA care arrangements by 1 child per year (saving on average £30,000 per year)
- reduce external children's home care arrangements by 1 child per year (saving on average £222,600 per year)

1.8 Appendices:

Appendix 1: Fostering Strategy 2022-25

Appendix 2: Equality Impact Assessment

1.9 Contact officers:

Julie Firth, Director Children's Services, Children, Young People and Learning
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Jackie Ingram, Senior Manager, Children In Care, Health, Education, Care and Safeguarding, tel. 07973763630

Juliet Morris, Improvement Manager, Health, Education, Care and Safeguarding, tel. (0191) 643 4965

Jane Cross, Senior Business Partner, Strategic Finance, tel. (0191) 643 3166

1.10 Background information:

The following background papers/information have been used in the compilation of this report and are available at the office of the author:

- (1) Fostering Strategy 2019-21 [Fostering Strategy 2019-21 Appendix 1.pdf \(northtyneside.gov.uk\)](#)
- (2) Report to Cabinet 14 October 2019 [North Tyneside Council](#)

PART 2 – COMPLIANCE WITH PRINCIPLES OF DECISION MAKING

2.1 Finance and other resources

Should the recommendations in paragraph 1.2 be approved by Cabinet this would result in an additional annual cost to the Authority in the region of £0.326m (including the savings achieved from ceasing the out of hours Foster Carer Advise and Support telephone service. However, this would be offset by reduced IFA costs and reduced external children's home care costs which would result in cost avoidance in the region of £0.253m based on current activity levels. The net financial impact of implementing the Fostering Strategy would therefore be an additional annual cost to the Authority of £0.073m. As the changes will be implemented on 1 January 2023 and will not be backdated it is anticipated that this will result in an additional part-year implementation cost to the Authority of £0.085m. It is not anticipated that any offsetting cost avoidance can be achieved in the current financial year.

For information implementing the proposed options will allow the Authority to reduce the use of IFA care arrangements by 1 child per year and reduce external children's home care arrangements by 1 child per year, saving on average £0.253m per year.

2.2 Legal

The Authority have a general statutory duty under section 22G of the Children Act 1989 to take steps to secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the Authority's area which meets the needs of children that the local authority are looking after and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the Local Authority's area (the so-called 'sufficiency duty').

2.3 Consultation/community engagement

2.3.1 Internal Consultation

Consultation has been undertaken with service managers within Children's Services.

2.3.2 External Consultation/Engagement

2.3.2.1 The Authority has consulted with Foster Carers regarding the proposed change in policy and linked in with other Authorities within the North East and adjoining regions about their approach to the payment of age-related allowances. The outcome of this engagement has informed this report.

2.3.3.2 The Authority held two consultation events on the afternoon of 27th September 2022 and the evening of 28th September 2022. Feedback from attendees showed that they were in favour of the proposed changes. An online satisfaction survey was also circulated to Foster Carers, running from 26th August to 11th September. A total of 23 responses were received.

2.4 Human rights

There are no direct human rights implications arising from this report.

2.5 Equalities and diversity

An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been undertaken in relation to the Fostering Strategy detailed in this report. This is attached at Appendix 2.

The EIA has identified the following potential negative impacts:

- Age - Under UK law, a person can foster at the age of 18, but the consensus amongst most foster service providers and social workers, including the Authority, is that Foster Carers should be aged 21 or more
- Disability - There may be circumstances where the level of disability makes matching a child with that carer more difficult. The fostering assessment and placement match takes into account all of the protected characteristics of both the Foster Carer and the child or young person, with the specific aim of ensuring equality of opportunity

2.6 Risk management

The implementation of the proposed Fostering Strategy will address the risk of insufficient Foster Care placements to meet the needs of the Borough. The lack of placements for child and young people requiring care to safeguard them for harm is a significant corporate risk in terms of the Authority's statutory responsibilities towards children and in relation to placement budget pressures resulting from the purchase of higher cost placements from third party commercial providers.

2.7 Crime and disorder

There are no specific crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

2.8 Environment and sustainability

There are no specific environment or sustainability implications arising from this report.

PART 3 - SIGN OFF

- Chief Executive X
- Director(s) of Service X
- Mayor/Cabinet Member(s) X
- Chief Finance Officer X
- Monitoring Officer X
- Assistant Chief Executive X