

<b>Subject:</b>	Update on Independent Fostering Agency
<b>Reason for briefing note:</b>	Children's Overview and Scrutiny Panel seek assurance on the support for local foster carers following the requirement for Achieving for Children to register and act as an Independent Fostering Agency.
<b>Responsible officer(s):</b>	Matthew Edwards/Lin Ferguson
<b>Senior leader sponsor:</b>	Kevin McDaniel
<b>Date:</b>	21 March 2019

## SUMMARY

1. **This paper sets out the reasons for the RBWM Fostering Team being incorporated into Achieving for Children's Independent Fostering Agency (IFA), and the plans to improve and develop the service moving forward.**
2. **Significant work has already been undertaken to align and clarify the foster carer fees and allowance structure across the IFA and reward carers who take more complex children.**
3. **A clearer competency framework is in place allowing foster carers to understand how they can progress up the three foster carer levels.**
4. **There is a significant drive on foster care recruitment with a strategy in place to attract, support and train new carers. RBWM currently has 45 fostering households and is seeking to grow that by a net gain of 10 in 2019-2020.**
5. **There is also a strong focus on raising the engagement of existing carers by giving them more of a say in how the service is run, consulting them regularly on areas where the service needs to improve. Critical areas that foster carers have consistently raised are making sure they have sufficient information when the child is first placed with them and that their views are fully taken into account when decisions are taken about a child's care plan.**

## 1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In April 2018 a decision was taken to bring the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Family Placement (Fostering Team) into the Independent Fostering Association (IFA) that Achieving for Children was being asked to create by Ofsted due to being a community interest company.
- 1.2 It was recognised that registering RBWM as a separate IFA or bringing them in to the already established IFA at a later date would miss the opportunity to involve RBWM carers from shaping and owning the IFA from it's very beginning. Best fostering practice, policy and

procedure could also be taken from all three authorities particularly as they possessed similar numbers of foster carers and were facing almost identical recruitment and retention challenges. Creating a larger pool of foster carers would improve placement matching as it would allow for RBWM children to be placed with Richmond or Kingston foster carers and vice versa in exceptional situations where a more local placement was either not available or had been ruled out for safeguarding reasons. An IFA Board was established and six workstreams, all with RBWM foster carer representation, have been established to drive the development of the Association.

- 1.3 A workstream led on AfC's Offer to foster carers to create a fair and transparent fees and allowance system which rewards both the carers level of experience and the support for children with higher levels of complexity. AfC have made its IFA fees and allowances competitive with other IFAs and believe that it has a unique selling point to prospective carers in that it can prioritise placing local children coming into care with the carers. AfC have now developed a new competency based training framework for carers with a much clearer progression pathway .
- 1.4 A Publicity, Recruitment, and Retention workstream is overseeing the response to AfC's Sufficiency Strategy which has identified the need for a net increase of 100 carers across all three authorities within five years. The five year growth projection for RBWM is 37 fostering households, moving from 45 to 82. AfC have developed a new recruitment strategy based on attracting new carers through targeted postings on Facebook and , developing word of mouth recruitment by a more dynamic "refer a friend scheme" for foster carers, AfC staff, and wider partners. AfC have also reviewed then assessment process from first referral to approval to ensure it is swift, supportive and delivers high quality induction training.
- 1.5 An Assessment, approval, review and panel workstream is developing an operating model and policies relation to the assessment and approvals process for potential foster carers and the role and constitution of the panels. AfC are in the process bringing the RBWM and Richmond and Kingston fostering panels together aligning the processes and creating one central list. The Panel will still meet in two geographical areas but will be overseen by a Single Panel Adviser.
- 1.6 A Matching and Placement Workstream is focusing on achieving better matching and placement for children to improve their chances of placement stability. Foster Carers have particularly asked AfC to review information that is given to them about the child and information about the prospective carers provided to the the child in advance of the placement.
- 1.7 There is a Policy, Systems and Inspection readiness workstream which will have audited all the files of RBWM mainstream foster carers against the National Minimum Standards to review any gaps and weaknesses by the end of March 2019. An action plan will be created in response to this audit.

## **2 KEY IMPLICATIONS**

- 2.1 Reimbursement for foster carers is made up of two components: an allowance which directly goes towards covering the practical care needs of the child and a carer's fee which is a reward fee based on the the skill level of the carer, organised in three levels. Children receive pocket money which is taken out of the foster care allowance. The fostering allowance rates are being kept in line with DfE guidance and are set out in table 2.1.

Carer level	Allowance per week per child / £		
	DfE minimum weekly allowance - 2018 to 2019 (London)	Richmond and Kingston	Windsor and Maidenhead
Babies	146	(0 to 2 years) 146	(0 to 4 years) 147
Pre-primary	149	(3 to 5 years) 149	
Primary	168	(6 to 10 years) 168	(5 to 10 years) 165
11 to 15	190	(11 to 15 years) 190	(11 to 15 years) 187
16 to 17	222	(16 to 17 years) 222	(16+ years) 219

2.2 The IFA fostering fee structure closely aligns with the three tiered structure already operating in RBWM. This has also now been adopted by Richmond and Kingston Cabinets in February 2019. The new fee structure (in table 2.2) is based on the following principles:

- i.) Promoting the wellbeing of children and young people to improve children's outcomes in adult life.
- ii.) A single, fair and transparent offer for all AfC carers that distributes money according to the child's needs and the carer's skills and experience, including incentivising care for the most complex children and stepping down to less intensive support.
- iii.) A competitive offer that supports the recruitment and retention of foster carers in line with the sufficiency strategy and offers value for money to the Councils.
- iv.) An offer that minimises disruption to carers and potential risk to placement stability, including the number of carers who might see a decrease in their income.
- v.) A scaling tool is used to assess the child's level of complexity and this is completed by the child's social worker with the foster carer and their supervising social worker.

AfC carer level	Fee per week per child / £	Previous fee in RBWM
Level 1	195	195
Level 2	260	260
Level 3	290	390
Supplementary fee - moderately complex	50	This did not previously exist in RBWM The weekly supplementary fee is in recognition of the demands that caring for children with more complex needs places on carers.
Supplementary fee - highly complex	100	
Supplementary fee - at risk of residential care	Decided on a case by case basis in exceptional cases.	

- 2.3 Only three foster carers in RBWM could be negatively impacted by the new fee structure if they are at level three but not caring for a highly complex child. Those carers have all been met with individually and transitional arrangements are in place so they would be unaffected for existing placements until April 2020. It is considered highly unlikely any RBWM carers will cease fostering due to the new arrangements. However new RBWM foster carers are incentivized to join the IFA as they will receive an increase in their fees if they look after a moderately complex child.
- 2.4 For example a level three carer with a highly complex 15 year old would earn an allowance of £190, a reward fee of £290 and a supplementary fee of £100 totalling £580 per week for this child. A level one carer with a baby with no additional complexity would receive an allowance of £146 and a reward fee of £195 totalling £341 per week for this child.

### **3 Areas being developed**

- 3.1 An annual report of all fostering activity will be completed in May 2019. This will cover all three local authority areas but each data set will be broken down by authority so performance can be tracked in each area.
- 3.2 The IFA is looking at ways it can innovate and generate income to reinvest in the service. The training that has to be offered to prospective carers is always difficult to plan because of the small numbers coming through to one authority. It has therefore been agreed that the IFA will develop training courses running every two months which can be offered to other local authorities or IFAs if places have not been filled by internal applicants.
- 3.3. The Sufficiency Strategy has identified the need for more local Parent and Child foster placements. Parent and child placements are a specialist type of fostering where a young parent, usually a mother and baby, stays with a foster carer at a time when they need extra support and advice. Using an external IFA can cost up to £2000 per week so a Parent and Child Fostering scheme will be developed firstly to meet local need (up to 10 placements required per year across the three authorities) and potentially as an income source.
- 3.4 The Sufficiency Strategy has also identified the need for Supported Lodgings arrangements in all three authorities. Supported Lodgings are a form of supported accommodation for vulnerable people who are not ready to live independently for a variety of reasons. Of the 47 Care Leavers in RBWM, 7 were considered at one stage to be in unsuitable accommodation e.g. in emergency accommodation or temporarily staying with a friend. While they are now in suitable accommodation it would have been better for them to have had the option of supported lodgings. Some care leavers benefit from developing their independence skills whilst still living with a family and receiving support from adults in the home. AfC will develop an in-house supported lodging scheme which will expand existing supported accommodation options and provide places for care leavers aged 16 to 21 years.
- 3.5 Foster carers in RBWM describe previous experiences as unsatisfactory because they were given poor or scant information when a child first enters their home, not feeling their views are heard and respected when it comes to care planning, and frequent changes of either the child's social worker or their supervising social worker. Morale has certainly improved by having consistent management and RBWM foster carers are now an integral part of the IFA development and sitting on the Governing Board. AfC have developed a comprehensive foster carers handbook and are also expanding the training offer to carers and offering them more bespoke and practical courses. We are currently sending out a questionnaire to all carers to ascertain their views about the fostering service. We will use their feedback to update the Foster Carers Charter and will review retention annually.

## **4 RISKS**

- 4.1 It is anticipated that Ofsted will inspect the IFA between April and July 2019. The auditing of current foster files in all three areas suggests that our rating would currently be “requires improvement” because the quality of recording does not reflect the good supervision and support taking place. An action plan has been created which maps current practice against the 2011 Fostering National Minimum Standards. Work is being undertaken at the next Forum to review the Foster Carers Charter so carers are far more aware of what AfC expects from them and vice versa.
- 4.2 Foster carers are increasingly likely to approach other fostering agencies to obtain the best fees, training and support packages. AfC’s IFA needs therefore to compete against well resourced IFAs in the private market and growing our pool of foster carers in RBWM from 45 fostering households to 82 over five years is a major challenge. Growing the in house pool of foster carers reduces spend on external placement budgets with in house placements costing generally costing a third to a half less per week (£450 per week rather than £700-900) which creates space for reinvestment in the IFA service. For the IFA to be successful Investment will be required in recruitment activity, having sufficient capacity to undertake assessments in a timely way, and supervising social worker caseloads will need to be kept at a level where carers feel they are receiving a responsive service. There is sufficient budget for 2019-20 to do this providing the flow of new foster carers develops as planned.

## **5 NEXT STEPS**

- 5.1 A full annual fostering report can be brought to Scrutiny from June 2019. Our aim for 2019-20 is to achieve a net gain of 10 fostering households. Last year the number of in house carers fostering households held steady at around 45. It is however noted that in February 2019 55 children were placed with those carers whereas back in February 2018 that number was only 44 children. We need to continue to keep vacancy rates down and maximise the use of our in house carers.
- 5.2 The implementation plan for the next three to six months involves the following key actions:
- i.) Review duty, matching and placement process to ensure both the foster carers and the child receive better introductions and key information is shared before placements are made. Foster carer profiles to be updated so these can be shared with the child beforehand.
  - ii.) Standardise the annual foster home review format across AFC. Take all foster carers back to fostering panel at point of annual review to be approved as IFA carers.
  - iii.) Develop a road-map for prospective foster carers to understand the assessment and approval process, including the checks that are carried out.
  - iv.) Run “Skills to foster course” every two months so that there are no delays for prospective carers.
  - v.) Continue to develop the foster carer recruitment campaign on Facebook, publicise the refer a friend incentive scheme and put on additional information evenings during Foster Care fortnight in May.
  - vi.) Create one central fostering panel that meets in both areas with a wider diversity of members.
  - vii.) Agree process for ratification of long term fostering arrangements (achieving permanency) across both areas.
  - viii.) Develop with carers the foster carers handbook and charter and complete survey on retention.