

## **CABINET - INFORMATION REPORT**

Date Written	November 2020
Report Author	Taryn Stephens
Service Area	Children's Services
Exempt/Non Exempt	Non Exempt
Committee Date	6 <sup>th</sup> January 2021

*To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen*

### **Foster Care Incentives**

#### **1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT**

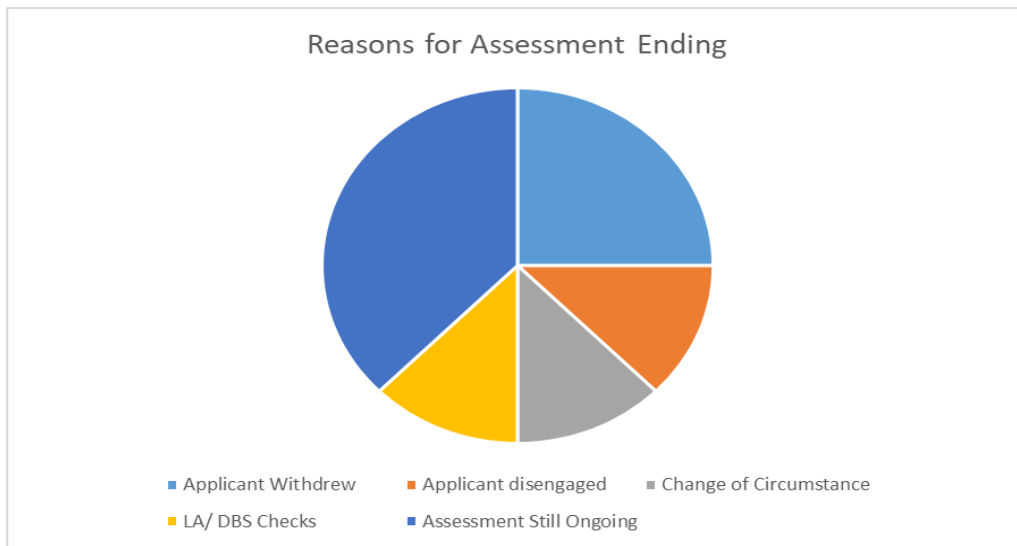
- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Cabinet on the incentives available to Merthyr Tydfil mainstream foster carers.
- 1.2 The report will provide an overview of the incentives available and update Cabinet on the impact of the council tax incentive agreed by the Local Authority in November 2019.

#### **2.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Local Authorities have a legislative duty to under Part 6 of the Social Services and Well-being Act 2014 (Wales) to ensure that they are able to provide looked after children with accommodation that is within the Local Authority's area and that meets children's needs.
- 2.2 Since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019, we have been working in collaboration with RCTCBC to operate a Regional Front Door for fostering recruitment. The team consists of a Regional Development Manager, Regional Recruitment Officer and Regional Communications and Marketing Officer. This footprint is being expanding to include Bridgend in 2021.
- 2.3 Merthyr Tydfil's fostering service has seen an increase in the numbers of children looked after (CLA) being placed over the last three consecutive years, in line with increasing children looked after numbers. During this period, we have seen a small decrease in our overall approved mainstream foster carer population combined with a number of longstanding foster carers retiring. The primary objective of fostering

recruitment activity in 2019/20 was to increase the amount of approved mainstream foster carers for the Local Authority, aiming to increase the number of CLA being placed with our own foster carers and reduce the need to use external fostering agencies. However, during 2019/20, whilst the number of enquires in relation to becoming a foster carer increased from the public, there was not an increase in the number of fostering assessments progressing to approval.

2.4 Below highlights the reasons for an Assessment ending:



2.5 In Line with Children’s Services commitment to improving our local sufficiency of suitable placements, Children’s Services have developed a Placement Commissioning Strategy. The action plan linked to this strategy includes work that is under way to increase the supply of Merthyr Tydfil foster carers.

2.6 Difficulties in recruiting in-house foster carers has led to a reliance on independent fostering agencies and out of county placements. Whilst it is acknowledged that young people placed within independent foster placements have achieved positive outcomes, reliance on independent fostering agencies (IFAs) at the current rate is unsatisfactory in terms of both placement location and cost to the Council.

**3.0 WHERE WE WERE**

3.1 In order to continually increase the number of Local Authority foster carers and to compete with the IFAs, Children’s Services in partnership with the Regional Fostering Service have developed our offer for our potential and current foster carers. Whilst experience has demonstrated that we cannot compete with IFA financial rates, there are things that we as a Local Authority can offer, that they simply cannot provide and it is these areas that we need to explore in order to set our offer apart from other agencies.

3.2 In June 2019 we consulted with our mainstream foster carers. The responses highlighted what carers would like to see included in any future offer to foster carers and overwhelmingly a reduction in council tax came out as the highest response rate in addition to discount cards, uniform subsidy, increased allowances and free car

parking in town centres. In November 2019 Cabinet agreed the proposal that the Council's offer to mainstream foster carers living in Merthyr Tydfil would receive a 50% reduction in Council tax, and a detriment payment to Merthyr Tydfil mainstream foster carers living outside of the Local Authority.

## **4.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW**

4.1 The Fostering Service is an area of continual development for Merthyr Tydfil Children's Services in order to support placement sufficiency and the stability of placements for our children who are looked after.

4.2 MTCBC's current foster carer offer includes the following benefits:

- Weekly financial allowances for both the foster carer and the child they have placed with them.
- Comprehensive training programme, including the 'Skills to Foster' course and access to a wide range of professional qualifications and development opportunities.
- A social worker specifically allocated to the foster carer that will visit regularly.
- Foster carer pioneers offering professional and social support, including mentoring and coffee mornings.
- Out of hours support from the Emergency Duty Team.
- Placement support from the Supporting Change Outreach Service.
- Membership of the Fostering Network, which is a national network of foster carers and the children they support.
- Free leisure membership for the foster carer, a partner (or friend) and the children.
- Free discount card to get exclusive discounts in local shops, restaurants and on days out.
- 50% incentive payment towards council tax.
- Paid time off for MTCBC staff who foster for MTCBC (days during assessment and 5 days per year following approval).
- Support groups and consultation events.
- Activities including sessional parties.

4.3 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 the number of children placed with IFA carers sat at 45, by comparison as of 30<sup>th</sup> November 2020 the number of children placed with IFA carers was 39. This is a reduction of six IFA placements. The business case that was placed before Cabinet in November 2019 demonstrated that a reduction of two IFA placements was required to meet the additional costs incurred by the Local Authority of the council tax incentive.

4.4 In Merthyr Tydfil, Local Authority foster carers are on average paid fees and allowances of £342 per week (approximately £17,784 per annum). In comparison the average cost of an IFA placement is £754.60 per week (approximately £39,239 per annum). This constitutes a difference of £21,455 per annum per child placed. To date the council tax incentive has been accessed by 26 foster care placements and has cost £21,640.

- 4.5 The Fostering Pioneers have been a new development in 2020, the purpose is to formulise a clear pathway of support for foster carers with experienced foster carers. The development of these roles has supported foster carers having clear input into the development of Children's Services to ensure we understand their support needs in order to create placement stability for our young people. Placement stability within a safe and nurturing environment is a key component for our children who are looked after meeting their potential.
- 4.6 Foster carers have taken part during quarter 3 2020/21 in a scoping exercise to understand the out of hours support available to carers and our young people. This has developed rich information on how we can develop the Outreach Service based as part of the Supporting Change Team to best support the placements of our children looked after. The service has been fundamental in supporting children to safety remaining at home and there is clear transferability in the resource to support our children looked after with complex needs during crisis periods. This is a resource that IFAs cannot offer with the same intensity and range of support.
- 4.7 A comprehensive marketing plan was developed for 2020/21 whilst this has progressed with targeted marketing it is important to acknowledge that the COVID pandemic has been a barrier to many of the fostering events we would normally undertake. Awareness raising of the council tax incentive coincided with announcements of Stay at Home requirements in March 2020. There is a plan to ensure there is a marketing drive to ensure this offer is well circulated in the form of a relaunch.

## **5.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE**

- 5.1 In terms of where we want to be Merthyr Tydfil Children's Services has a clear vision of development in its mainstream placement sufficiency. We currently have six fostering assessments in progress in comparison with three full fostering assessments undertaken in 2019/20.
- 5.2 As the supply of Merthyr Tydfil foster carers increases, the Council will need to review the staffing establishment in the fostering team to ensure that high quality support can be stepped up in line with the increase in foster carers. The reduction in demand from IFAs will facilitate investment in fostering retention should the increase in Merthyr Tydfil foster carers require this. Work is under way to understand the tipping point for the cost benefit in order to ensure that there is no uncontrolled growth. We are making plans for all Merthyr Tydfil looked after young people to achieve safe and successful lives.

## **6.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT**

- 6.1 Ensuring our offer for mainstream foster carers is fit for purpose is a priority, as such this is an area of business for Children's Services that will need to be subject to ongoing review and development. Placement sufficiency and stability will promote us supporting our children looked after meeting their potential.

6.2 Key steps for the service include:

- Increasing the awareness and knowledge within the general public of the foster carer incentives that Merthyr Tydfil Council offer.
- Continuing with our currently timely and prompt response to enquiries.
- Ensuring there is a stable pool of assessors available to undertake foster assessments in a timely manner.
- Building upon the Learning and Development Framework for foster carers.
- Increase the offer to our foster carers from the Supporting Change Service.
- Scoping models of support for our foster care placements, such as developing robust respite arrangements. This is also a component of our edge of care planning to support family resilience to allow children to safely remaining within their family home.
- Engaging in National Fostering Framework developments.
- Continuing to listen to our foster carers and children looked after to understand what good support looks like for them.

## 7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report as the business is delivered.

## 8.0 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1

	Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts	Not Applicable
<b>1. Merthyr Tydfil Well-being Objectives</b>	4 of 4	0 of 4	0 of 4
<b>2. Sustainable Development Principles - How have you considered the five ways of working:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long term</li> <li>• Prevention</li> <li>• Integration</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Involvement</li> </ul>	5 of 5	0 of 5	0 of 5
<b>3. Protected Characteristics</b> <i>(including Welsh Language)</i>	0 of 10	0 of 10	10 of 10
<b>4. Biodiversity</b>	0 of 1	0 of 1	1 of 1

**Summary:**

The main positive impacts are the development and improvement of services for children and young people.

There are no negative impacts.

**LISA CURTIS JONES**  
**CHIEF OFFICER (SOCIAL SERVICES)**

**COUNCILLOR CHRIS DAVIES**  
**CABINET MEMBER FOR**  
**SOCIAL SERVICES**

<b>BACKGROUND PAPERS</b>		
<b>Title of Document(s)</b>	<b>Document(s) Date</b>	<b>Document Location</b>
Previous Foster Carer Incentives cabinet report	November 2019	
<b>Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?</b>		No

***Consultation has been undertaken with the Corporate Management Team in respect of each proposal(s) and recommendation(s) set out in this report.***