

MEMBER/PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO SCRUTINY 23 March 2022

1.1 Question from Annette Clarke

How do you anticipate that the current changes will have a positive impact on recruitment and retention when Norfolk have been shown to be dismissive, telling foster carers that they have no rights and by implication can therefore reduce payments again further down the line?

Response from the service

The new proposal is both fair and consistent, but also represents some of the highest foster carers payments in the country, both in terms of LAs and in terms of IFAs. In addition, the training, support and opportunities that are available to carers are some of the best on offer. As such, we believe that the new offer to foster carers in Norfolk, and to those thinking of becoming foster carers, will attract a great deal of interest when rolled out as part of our new Recruitment Strategy.

1.2 Question from Anne Ritchie

Why is Task and Finish Group (TFG) being used as a scapegoat regarding lack of co-production/consultation? The presentation at the meeting (16.03.22) states that 'We wanted to work directly with foster carers to develop this proposal and raised it a number of times in the task and finish group.' TFG was asked to'look at accreditation levels 3-4-5 using 'Matrix' to clarify how a carer can get from one level to another...' (TFG minutes 23.03.21). Management agreed it was a big piece of work and wanted to involve other NFS workers. (TFG minutes 27.04.21). This was not followed up. Removing accreditation levels was never put to the group.

Response from the service

There is no intention to blame anyone. Co-production of the new fostering allowances was discussed on a number of occasions with the Task and Finish group, who advised this task was too big for the group, seeking for Officers to first devise a proposal for carers to comment on. The task and finish group work on behalf of the Fostering Advisory Partnership and the members of the T&F group all sit on FAP. As such, FAP could follow up on the matter at any time.

Question from Anita Goodwin

We had sought to work more collaboratively with Foster Carers, seeking to design the new fee structure together. However, they were clear in their feedback in a number of forums over the past few months that they wanted the department to develop a proposal which Foster Carers could then review and give their view, stating it is for the Council to decide what they want to do."

What are the committee taking from the Foster Carers feedback on the proposal now as they seem to be disregarding our comments and concerns, there is a definite financial implication of FCs moving to agencies regardless of capping. Will the committee reconsider these costings?

What is the purpose of the fostering charter when it clearly is not following it's own guidelines. "We must ensure we that we consult with foster carers in a meaningful way on matters that affect them. Give foster carers timely feedback from consultations. Provide clear information on how foster carers can give us feedback and report concerns."

It appears that despite the repeated mantra 'we value and respect our foster carers' in reality you do not as is apparent from these proposals

Response from the service

The consultation period was initially set at 2 weeks, however due to the level of engagement from carers, the period was extended for a further two weeks. During the month long consultation, feedback was sought from foster carers throughout the service. Feedback to the consultation was provided just a few days after the consultation period ended.

All feedback was taken into account; additional elements were considered within the final paper to Cabinet, however Children's Services were unable to offset the costs related to these additional elements in such a challenging post pandemic financial climate, and as such, Children's Services could not recommend them.

1.4 Lenora Bartrum

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1.5 Question from Craig Suggitt

If the current level 5 payment of £336 a week is still not attractive for recruitment and retention purposes what is the thinking behind expecting that 75% of carers receiving £223 would be more attractive? only 5% of carers would be higher than current level 5

low pay has an impact on mental health, why are you reducing payments as that is likely to have a negative impact on foster carers mental health, which may in turn affect a carer's ability to look after a child, lead to compassion fatigue and placement breakdown, while at the same time stating that you want stable placements?

Response from the service

Whilst 73% of NFS foster carers are level 5 accredited, only 30% may experience a reduction in allowances in October 2023, if their circumstances don't change in that time. However this would be a different picture for new foster carers joining Norfolk Fostering Service. It is absolutely not the intention to impact on the mental health of any foster carers, and we would urge any foster carer experiencing mental health difficulties to speak to their supervising social worker who can provide support and ensure services are available to meet the needs of individual foster carers.

One of the challenges with the current fostering allowances is that carers do not receive level 5 accreditation when they join Norfolk Fostering Service. The majority of new carers receive a 'fee' of £30 per week. As such, it is likely that vastly increased payments available to foster carers looking after children with no additional needs will attract more potential foster carers.

1.6 Question from Amy Clipsham

One of our roles as foster carer is to help support the children in our care to continue to have strong links with their family through engagement in family time, helping support their feelings around why they are in care and potentially support them in reunification. Does Councillor Fisher accept that he makes this difficult for us by stating on LinkedIn that "There are no bad children just bad parents or carers"?

Does Councillor Fisher also accept that to make such a sweeping statement in the public domain goes against the principles of being a Corporate Parent?

Response

The intention of the comment was to reinforce that children come into care because of gaps and deficits in their parenting, and that our foster carers and social care practitioners are at the very frontline of working with them to meet needs, repair and make sense of their experiences, and allow them to flourish.

1.7 Question from Thomas Clipsham

- 1.8 At the meeting on 16th March we were informed that as we are self employed we do not have any rights. People have signed up to be foster carers with Norfolk , with many moving from agency(to save Norfolk money in agency fees) believing that they would be paid the current level 5 pay, in fact this is what the website and social media still advertise. Can you please give examples of other cases where Norfolk have reneged on agreements and paid suppliers only 66.5% of what was agreed?

How do you anticipate that the current changes will have a positive impact on recruitment and retention when Norfolk have been shown to be dismissive, telling foster carers that they have no rights and by implication can therefore reduce payments again further down the line?

Response from the service

It is correct that foster carers are not employees, and that they have a legal status unique to foster carers in respect of HMRC and employment. The discussion at the meeting was in response to questions about salaries. The Care Planning Regulations are clear that foster cares should be provided with sufficient allowance to meet the care needs of a child or children placed with them

1.9 Question from Marilyn Woollard

Cabinet members and children's services were all warned that there was a very big risk that carers might leave, or move to agencies (at a higher cost to Norfolk) so that they could provide greater stability to the children placed with them. The Community Care article and other media coverage points to a large number planning on leaving. With this in mind how many foster carers have asked for their Form F, how many have put in their intention to transfer to agency and how many have already resigned including the one during yesterday's meeting?

why are Norfolk children placed with Kinship carers in London not paid the recommended minimum payment for maintenance payments for London?

Response from the service

Currently there has been one resignation and 8 carers have requested their Form F with the intent to consider alternative fostering agencies.

Kinship allowances paid to Special Guardians are set out in legislation and subject to means testing and deductions for Child Benefit.

1.10 Question from Betsy Pennington

in the Foster carers charter it is stated that: we recognise that foster carers have a right to be treated fairly no matter the circumstances
We must : consult with foster carers before changing terms and conditions
In view of this do you agree that this has not been followed with only 13 days to reply, not informing us that you were extending the consultation period and not having open and honest discussions and communication

as we need to provide a stable home for children in our care , how do you propose that we do that if we are unable to pay bills making our housing situation unstable?

Response from the service

We do not want to see any foster carers experience difficulties with their bills or housing situation and have committed within the cabinet paper, the consultation and the foster carer feedback, to ensuring that financial support is available to any foster carers who may experience difficulties as you describe.

Throughout the consultation, as stated in the engagement document, with subsequent regular reminder e mails, we have offered, and continue to do so, one to one consultation with all foster carers, both with their supervising social workers and with fostering managers, including the Head of Fostering, so that all carers can discuss their own situation and any worries they may have.

1.11 Question from Samantha Rowand

If it was a true consultation with foster carers why was there not an offer of a meeting where we could ask and get clarity before cabinet or was it a pretend consultation as we were told yesterday we are self employed and you didn't need to consult with us?

Given that 75 level 5 carers currently have no vacancies, what is your contingency if they all leave /move to agency as they will lose 33.5% of the monies that they had believed they would receive and had budgeted for, meaning they are now unlikely to be able to afford to foster?

Response from the service

We offered to meet with all foster carers on a one to one basis to discuss their situation, their questions and their anxieties. We did not offer a group meeting as carers were unlikely to feel they were able to discuss their personal situation within a very large group and we wanted to maintain confidentiality for all carers in respect of their personal circumstances. The consultation process was available to all carers, with a majority offering their views and engaging in the consultation process.

It is not possible to comment on individual circumstances, however, those without children in placement are able to work with their supervising social workers to explore opportunities and development to ensure they do not receive less allowance for children when considering their next placement.