

FOSTER FOR PLYMOUTH: FOSTER CARER SUMMIT & COUNCIL TAX ALLOWANCE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Plymouth City Council held their first ever Fostering Summit on 31 January 2024 to consider and co-design our new and improved Support and Retention Offer to Our Foster Carers. The summit was attended by over 45 people with a wide range of roles and experience of fostering and provided a valuable opportunity to hear Foster Carers' experiences, feedback and ideas about how we can best support them and attract more foster carers to Foster for Plymouth.

There were some key themes from the group discussions which relate to financial support, practical and emotional support, perks and benefits, foster carers training, practice improvements and training for Children's Social Care and EPS.

The proposed changes to the offer will be implemented in two phases. This report sets out the three elements of the financial offer which have been progressed in phase one and the wider support and development elements of the offer through phase two.

INTRODUCTION

Plymouth City Council are committed to providing a robust, comprehensive, creative, competent and confident fostering family. We know that our Support Offer to Foster Carers is at the heart of our mission to improve the lives of children in care and to support our compassionate and committed Foster Carers.

Plymouth City Council held their first ever Fostering Summit on 31 January 2024. The aim of the summit was to consider and co-design our new and improved Support and Retention Offer to Our Foster Carers.

The summit was attended by over 45 people with a wide range of roles and experience of fostering in Plymouth. 18 Foster Carers and Connected Carers attended with a wide range of experience between them. They were joined by elected members, the Director of Children's Services, Service Director, Head of Service, Service Manager, Team Managers and Social Workers from the Fostering Teams and the Fostering Panel Chair. Other Foster Carers represented their views in writing or through the Foster Carer Ambassadors.

The summit provided a valuable opportunity to hear Foster Carers' experiences, feedback and ideas about how we can best support them and the children they look after as well as attract more foster carers to Foster for Plymouth.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

There were some key themes from the group discussions:

Financial Support: This includes an increase to financial allowances to allow for cost of living increases, making the reward payment equal across all ages of children and council tax exemption/reduction.

Practical and Emotional Support: This includes a clear, written Support & Retention Offer to our Foster Carers, and in house team of support services available (A wellbeing team, therapist, CAMHS, education support), greater support from the Virtual School and SEND Team and Out of Hours support which is consistent and have the right expertise,

Perks and Benefits: This includes free access to Plymouth City Council amenities or events and leisure cards for carers.

Training for Foster Carers: This includes childcare support to make attending training easier.

Practice Improvements and Training for Children's Social Care and EPS: There were a range of ideas shared which related more to the consistency of practice from professionals supporting children, young people and foster carers. This included the vital importance of communication and respect of each other's roles, timeliness of providing information, applying for passports and supporting children who are experiencing difficulties in education.

PROPOSALS AND NEXT STEPS

In order to ensure the three key proposed changes to the financial offer are progressed, the proposed changes will be implemented in two phases.

PHASE I – Key Changes to the Financial Offer to Our Foster Carers

The following elements were proposed and approved in the 2024/2025 Council Budget.

Annual Uplift to Fostering Allowances

A 6% uplift to the allowance (including the new reward payment) from 01 April 2024 with a commitment to an annual review of allowances in line with the financial year. After the 6% uplift, the weekly fostering allowance for children aged 0-10 was below the minimum weekly allowance set by government and as such these amounts have been uplifted slightly more than 6%.

The projected costs of £549,297 per financial year have been factored in to the agreed budget uplift in the 2024/25 budget. This has been implemented with Foster Carers receiving the uplifted allowances since 01 April 2024.

Reward Payments

The reward payments, which were previously less for children aged 0-10 than they are for those aged 11-17, are equalised at the higher level.

The projected costs of £299,877 per financial year have been factored in to the agreed budget uplift in the 2024/25 budget. This has been implemented with Foster Carers receiving the equal reward payments since 01 April 2024.

Festival, Birthday and Holiday Allowances

The Festival, Birthday and Holiday Allowances have been uplifted in line with the weekly maintenance allowances.

The projected costs were factored in to the agreed budget uplift in the 2024/25 budget. This has been implemented with Foster Carers receiving the uplifted festival, birthday and holiday allowances since 01 April 2024.

Council Tax Allowance

Foster Carers have been informed of Plymouth City Council's decision to implement a council tax allowance for Plymouth City Council Foster Carers from 01 April 2024. This will include arrangements for those living outside of Plymouth to reclaim their payments.

The projected costs of £235,734 per financial year have been factored in to the agreed budget uplift in the 2024/25 budget. We are seeking an endorsement of a new foster carers financial package that includes a Council Tax Allowance within the agreed 2024/25 financial envelope and the endorsement of the co-design of the support and retention offer;

PHASE 2 – Co-design of the Support and Retention Offer to Our Foster Carers

There have been discussions with Foster Carers in the Foster Carer Forum to progress the wider non-financial elements of the Support and Retention Offer to Our Foster Carers.

A working task and finish group will continue to meet on a regular basis to develop and shape the practical, emotional support, the training offer and other benefits.

We note that many of the issues and ideas raised in the summit relate to consistency and quality of practice. These elements will be addressed through the Children's Services Improvement Plans. The One Children's Service Induction is being updated and will include workshops with Foster Carers for all new staff alongside a proposal for sessions where Foster Carers, Social Workers and the wider professional network come together and share their views, ideas and learn together, with a particular focus on communication, value and respect.

The Foster Carer Summit will take place on an annual basis in January to ensure regular review and co-design off the Support and Retention Offer to Our Foster Carers.