

<b>REPORT TO:</b>	Executive Board
<b>DATE:</b>	12 <sup>th</sup> March 2026
<b>REPORTING OFFICER:</b>	Zoe Fearon, Executive Director of Children's Services
<b>PORTFOLIO:</b>	Children, Young People & Families
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	Fostering and Special Guardianship Carers Uplift Payment
<b>WARD(S)</b>	Boroughwide

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The report proposes an uplift of payments made to fostering and Special Guardianship Orders households in Halton to support foster carers/SGO carers/ Staying Put who are providing care and support to the children of Halton who are placed with these carers.
- 1.2 For most children who are unable to live with their birth family, a local foster placement is the best alternative, enabling them to grow up in a family environment, close to family, friends, their school, and health services that know them. The availability of local foster placements is therefore key to the ability of the council to provide sufficient placements for the looked after children for whom it is responsible.
- 1.3 As the corporate parent the council must ensure that its own internal fostering services is able to provide care for as many of these children as possible. The fostering service should provide foster carers with financial support that enables them to undertake the tasks required of them as part of a package of support that enables them to provide good quality care for the children placed with them.
- 1.4 The payment of fostering allowances is a key part of the support that the council provides to foster carers. However, it is only one aspect of the support provided: all foster carers in Halton have a supervising social worker; they are expected to attend regular training and support groups; and for several foster carers, additional support is being provided through the Mockingbird project whereby they receive peer support.
- 1.5 Our ambition is to ensure that foster carers receive a competitive allowance as part of a comprehensive support package, provided by a high performing fostering service in partnership with foster carers. The changes proposed in this report are step towards improving the allowances provided for Halton foster carers,

Currently in Halton our foster carers have not had an annual fee increase since 2023-2024 financial year, this is despite the government recommending that foster carer fees receive an annual uplift with a National Minimum Recommendation. For the year 2024-2025 this was 6.88% and for 2025-2026 this recommended amount is 3.55%.

1.6 In Halton we have continued to pay council tax payments for our foster carers and SGO carers which is an incentive not offered by all local authorities

1.7 This request is for foster carer allowances uplift and continuation of council tax and telephone allowances which are already in place.

- For all foster carers, Staying Put and SGO carers to be provided with an uplift of 2% for the 2024-2025 financial year. Payments be backdated to April 2024 to cover the costs of raising an extra child in their home.
- For the year 2025/26 for all foster carers, staying put carers and SGO carers to be uplifted by 2.5% for the financial year.
- All foster carers, SGO carers and Staying Put carers receive an uplift of 2.5% for 26/27.
- As part of our offer to recruit and maintain foster carers locally Halton Council have paid Council Tax for their carers once a child has been placed in their care. It is requested that this arrangement continues and approved Halton Foster Carers to continue to receive 100% council tax exemption at a cost of approximately £2000 per household per year. Based on 100 households this would require £200,000 per year additional funding. The current allowance is being reviewed to include stipulations on households only receiving tax relief once approved and children are in placement but where households are not taking children then council tax relief will cease.
- That the current monthly mobile phone allowance is maintained and payable to all approved Halton Fostering households. This is currently set at £15 per month.

## **2.0 RECOMMENDATION:**

1. That the report be noted.
2. The recommendation is that all Halton Council approved foster carers, staying put carers and SGO carers are provided with an uplift of 2% to be backdated to 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 and for the 2.5 % uplift to be applied from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025 until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026.
3. That approval is given to a further increase of 2.5% next year 26/27.

Should the recommendations be accepted there would be a cost pressure associated with the elements backdated to April.

### **3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

3.1 It is our priority to reduce the numbers of children we are caring for whilst ensuring that looked after children are in the right placement with the right support and recruiting and retaining high quality foster carers is the way we will achieve this. Consultation has taken place with our foster carers and they have recognised the financial pressures that are impacting on the council and suggested a 2% uplift across both years whilst still receiving the council tax and telephone allowances however this is not in line with the NRM and it is an ethical, strategic and financial priority for Halton Council Childrens Social Care to recruit more and retain our current cohort of foster carers and why we are suggesting a payment slightly above this level.

3.2 The council's challenge in recruiting and retaining foster carers is similar to that faced by many other councils nationally. Recruitment has declined at the same time as the number of children looked after has increased. Whilst we cannot always make a "like for like" comparison, our neighbouring authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies offer competitive packages of financial support to foster carers, which alongside the support packages help to maintain placement stability.

3.3 It is a risk that if we do not support our foster carers in line with our neighbouring local authorities, then we risk losing them. The loss of high-quality in-house carers would be financially detrimental for the council as it would leave little other alternative but to place children through higher-priced Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) or in residential homes. Placing children in external safeguarding provisions will not only be more costly for the council, but it would also take our children out of our most trusted, family and community-based environments.

### **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 Council Tax, Section 13A Discount-Policy Statement ( see Appendix 1)

4.2 The Recommendation is that the policy is amended and that the following the following is inserted.

*Halton Approved Foster carers may only receive Council Tax Exemption once Children are placed with foster carers. Council tax will only be paid for the period children are in placement and for a maximum of six weeks for carers who have taken a break.*

The rationale for this is that this amendment is that it will save the council from paying council tax exemption from when a foster carer is approved until the point that a child is placed as this could be several months post their fostering approval.

It is also recommended that any foster carers wishing to take a break from Fostering and become unavailable to take a placement for whatever reason then the council will only pay up to six weeks council tax exemption in any calendar year ie 1<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> March.

**5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 The estimated accruals that Finance financial forecast was based on 2% e have entered into Agresso for the uplift.

5.2 The cost implications for 25/26 will be an additional financial pressure on the council as forecast from finance factored in an uplift of 2% as opposed to the NRM rate of 3.55%. The figures below are an estimate completed by the finance team.

	24/25 based on 2%	25/26 Based on 2.5%	26/27 Based on 2.5%
SGO	£50,409	£61,150	£62,678
Fostering (Basic)	£38,904	£42,846	£43,918
Staying Put	£2603	£3318	£3401

**6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL’S PRIORITIES**

**6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence**

Ensuring our foster carers and SGO carers are supported in caring for our most vulnerable children will help our children to have the best start in life.

**6.2 Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy**

There are no economic benefits beyond possible positive impact on economic spending due to increased allowances available for our carers the majority who live in the Halton area.

**6.3 Supporting Children, Young People and Families**

Children, young people, their carer’s and families will be able to make choices that mean they can thrive and achieve.

Children and young people will feel heard and have a positive experience of their time growing up in Halton and be supported to realise their aspirations.

Children and young people will grow in their communities in a stable and settled environment.

Young people will have positive experiences of growing up in Halton and be equipped for adult life.

#### **6.4 Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need**

By strengthening our families and communities we will enable our cared for children to overcome their experiences of poverty, inequality and vulnerability.

#### **6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future**

Keeping our children close and with local foster carers will have an impact as there is less transport implications in terms of family time, social work visits etc.

#### **6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community**

N/A

#### **7.0 Risk Analysis**

7.1 The less favourable the uplift implemented increases the likelihood of complaints from foster carers which may lead to a negative impact on recruitment and retention of carers and less stability for our children in care.

7.2 Without the uplift we are failing to recognise the vital work our foster carers are doing and payments will not keep rate with the cost of living which will impact negatively on households.

#### **8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which means that, in carrying out their functions, they have a statutory duty to pay due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't.

8.2 Protected Characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership,

pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

- 8.3 If the recommendations in this report are agreed, we are committing to positive outcomes for young people from across a range of protected characteristics by ensuring they have access to the best care we can offer.

## **9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Climate change can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities for children in foster care, potentially leading to increased displacement and difficulties in maintaining stable placements.

Extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and droughts can force families to relocate, disrupting their lives and the lives of children in care. Additionally, climate change impacts can strain local resources, making it harder to find suitable foster homes and support services, ultimately leading to more children being placed far from their local area and family.

- **Strain on Resources:** -Climate change can exacerbate existing challenges in finding suitable foster homes, as resources are stretched by increased demand and the need to accommodate those affected by climate-related events.
- **Distance from Home and Family:** -A lack of suitable placements in their local area can lead to children being placed far from their families, friends, and schools.
- **Challenges for Foster Carers:**-Carers may face increased challenges in supporting children's needs, especially if they are not familiar with the child's background or have difficulty accessing local services.

Addressing the Issue:

- **Prioritize Local Placements:** -Local authorities should prioritize finding suitable foster homes within the child's local area to maintain connections with family and community.
- **Recruit and Retain Foster Carers:** -Efforts should be made to recruit and retain more foster carers, particularly those with experience working with children who have experienced trauma.
- **Strengthen Local Support Services:** -Ensuring access to essential services like healthcare, education, and social support is crucial for the well-being of children in care.
- **Raise Awareness:** -Educating the public about the impact of climate change on children in care can help build support for policies and programs that protect their well-being.

## **10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

Council Tax, Section 13A Discount-Policy Statement

[Help and support for foster parents in England: Help with the cost of fostering - GOV.UK](#)